Naruto Asunder

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The smallest of pebbles can create thousands of ripples. A simple off hand remark can create a lasting message. In the ninja world, these ripples will someday become the tidal waves that will tear the ninja world asunder.

Status: complete

Published: 2009-09-27

Updated: 2020-07-07

Words: 172679

Chapters: 25

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Drama - Characters: Naruto U., Hinata H. - Reviews: 824 - Favs: 1,874 - Follows: 1,206

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5403644/1/Naruto-Asunder

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

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NARUTO: ASUNDER

It is said that a single event, no matter how small and insignificant, can bring about amazing change. These changes could result in great and wonderful things… or consume everything in an evil and terrible fire. Regardless, a small change begets a drastic outcome… a small thread that unravels a massive cloth.

PRELUDE:

Naruto Uzumaki tapped his foot in annoyance as he leaned against the massive stone walls of Konohagakure. He was supposed to have left with Ero-Sennin almost an hour ago, but the perverted sage had yet to show up. He grit his teeth as the annoyance quickly became anger. He expected this from Kakashi-Sensei, but he was not going to spend the next three years waiting around while his new teacher was out peeping at women.

He pushed himself off the wall and kicked the dirt. Why did he always get the lazy and perverted senseis? It would be nice to just once get someone as focused and dependable as Gai… well maybe not quite that much. He went to kick the dirt again, but froze as a large shadow covered him. He spun around and looked up at Jiraiya's smiling face. Naruto scowled and sucked in a massive lungful of air as he prepared to let the sage know just how ticked he was.

"You really have no talent do you?" Jiraiya said.

The insult died right on Naruto's lips. He sputtered for a moment before he regained his composure and pointed an accusing finger at

the old man.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Naruto asked.

"I've been watching you for almost an hour. You never noticed me, even though I did little to hide my presence. You didn't notice the cute little Hyuga girl staring at you from behind the corner." A soft eep was heard followed by the crashing of trash bins and screeching cats. "And instead of putting in an hour of training, you sat here stewing about me being late."

"What's your point?" Naruto blinked in confusion. He always waited for Kakashi so why did he have to do anything different now?

Jiraiya sighed in defeat and scratched the back of his head with a small frown. He walked past his young charge and started down the path.

"Just try to use your time wisely gaki, come on let's go."

Hinata sprinted through Konoha's back alleys as her heart pounded against her chest. She had been caught! Oh God, Naruto must have thought she was some kind of stalker. She dove into the bushes that lined the Hyuga compound and crawled into a small hole that went under the wall. It was her own private way of getting around without being noticed. She knew she didn't need it, but she always felt uneasy when she walked out the front. It was like everyone was scrutinizing her. Where was she going? Why was she going? Why didn't she walk right? Who was she going to meet?

It was maddening.

She crept through the backyard and hopped up onto the deck silently. She had memorized every floorboard and knew which ones creaked and groaned. Over the years, she had mapped out the entire compound and knew where to step and how much weight to put down. Even in a place full of Byakugan users, she was fairly

confident she could move about undetected. It was at least easier than having to face any of them.

She darted into a dark corner as she heard muffled voices coming from the other side of the door. She recognized the voices immediately. It was her father, and her grandfather the Elder. Her heartbeat started to race again. When they talked, it never bode well for her.

"You must stop stalling, Hiashi. You have already determined that Hanabi is the more suitable heir, so why do you still let the other one roam about unsealed?" The Elder questioned.

Hinata's heart sank into her gut. Her grandfather couldn't even refer to her by name. She was the other one… the trash that was supposed to be taken out. It was bad enough that he wanted her sealed, but to ignore their relation… that hurt far worse.

"Father, Hinata is showing signs of growth. It would be foolish to stifle it."

"She can still improve with the Caged Bird Seal."

"And be unable to truly benefit the clan like Neji?"

"Neji is where he should be. Besides, Hinata is a different case entirely. Hinata is… dangerous."

"Excuse me?"

Hinata herself perked up at this and found herself leaning in closer. The tone her father used was that of retrained surprise. It was a tone she had never heard before.

"She seeks to change the traditions and practices that the clan has upheld for generations. Regardless of how well she has tried to hide it, I know this is her ultimate goal."

"So you give my child a death sentence instead of compromise? We both know the survival rate for anyone after the age of ten is poor at best."

"Your child? Hiashi, you are the head of this clan! Your responsibility is to us first and your own personal attachments second. Your child, as you put it, will bring about the destruction of our clan! The seal is the merciful way of dealing with someone who promotes the equivalent of treason."

Hinata almost passed out as a massive wave of killing intent flooded out from the room. She steadied herself and fought back the tears threatening to spill out of her eyes. They wanted her dead. It wasn't so much terrifying as it was painful. They hated her so much they wanted her to disappear. She forced herself to stay even as the majority of her wanted to run away and hide in some dark corner. But, she refused to move an inch even as her father's already immense anger increased.

"Elder, you had best choose your words carefully. I respect your consult and I will do what is necessary for this clan, but no one will touch my daughter and even thinking about it will bring down all of my fury."

"Calm yourself Hiashi."

"No, I calmed myself when the woman I loved passed away. I calmed myself when I sacrificed my brother. I will not with Hinata. I am the head of this clan. I will decide what is best. As dictated by our traditions, the strongest of the main branch will lead the clan. I still have three years before the final decision is made. It will not be made until that time. Am I clear?"

The murderous intent died down and Hinata could breathe again. She didn't need to hear anymore. Her father had closed the issue for the time being. She slipped away towards her room as her head swam with all that she had heard. Yet, she found herself sporting a small smile. Her father had fought for her, and the conservative side

of the clan was afraid of her. The implication that she was a threat helped boost her confidence. She had to be careful and bide her time, but it seemed to her she needed to catch them by surprise. She needed to be unpredictable and she knew who to emulate to do that.

Rock Lee panted heavily as he punched the splintering tree yet again. His muscles ached and the frown he had been sporting for the last six hours had given him a headache, but he would not stop. His limits had been made painfully clear to him over the past few months. What had taken him years to learn took the genius Sharingan user a month. The Uchiha had taken his hard work and copied it like a monkey, and then used it on his fellow nin. He had been both beaten and rescued by Gaara of the Sand. In the end, he had been only a diversion to hold off the strange bone user. If he was honest with himself, he had been far from the outstanding shinobi he had set out to be.

It had made him completely lost and unsure of how to continue. He knew he would improve, but not to the degree that the others would. They would learn new jutsu and use their chakra to access great power. He would have his speed and access to the gates, a technique with such severe consequences it was barely usable. However, no matter how hard he tried, his current path would not allow him to stand on the same field as the geniuses.

He kicked the tree and it groaned from the strain. He sometimes cursed his body. It was a secret he would never share with any one, not even Gai-Sensei. They would not understand, and his teacher would feel a great guilt that his prized student had lost confidence. His beloved sensei would blame himself and after all the man had done for him, Lee would never allow that to happen. He threw another roundhouse kick and the tree shattered. He watched as the splinters danced toward the ground. The tree was like his body in a way. His body would inevitably break down, either by long years of harsh training or releasing the gates.

He turned towards a young sapling that stood maybe three feet tall. It seemed so out of place in a forest filled with giants, but somehow the little tree seemed tall and full of pride. His frown deepened and in a rare moment of anger, he kicked the tree as hard as he could. It bent with his leg and then snapped back and hit him square in the nose. He fell back onto his butt and grabbed his nose as blood started to leak from it. His eyes grew wide and a dumb struck expression appeared on his face. His mind danced over what had just happened and gradually his normally blinding smile returned.

"Yosh!" He jumped up and bowed to the sapling respectfully. "Thank you for re-igniting my flames of youth! I know now how to fan it into a raging storm."

He turned and blasted out of the woods, as a giant cloud of dust was left in his wake.

"Gai-Sensei!"

"For crying out loud Ero-Sennin! Why won't you teach me anything useful?"

Naruto glared at the toad sage sitting under the tree. Jiraiya looked up from his notes as his eye slightly twitched. The old man let out a slow breath and then returned to his notes. Naruto clenched his teeth and stomped up to his teacher. Jiraiya didn't look up and Naruto knocked the papers out across the forest floor. He was shaking in anger as he stood over the older man. Jiraiya sighed and began picking up the scattered parchment.

"I have been teaching you Naruto. I've taught you a great deal in a relatively short amount of time."

"It's been a year you damn pervert and all I've learned is how to break a genjutsu and use my Kage Bunshin's a little better! I haven't learned any new jutsu or anything else. How am I supposed to

rescue Sasuke or fight the Akatsuki when I'm not any further ahead then before?"

Jiraiya shoved the papers back into his vest and stood. He took a deep breathe and leaned over so that his face was just a few inches in front of Naruto's.

"I'm not here to hold your hand you little brat!"

"I'm not asking you too. How about just teaching me instead of working on your trashy novels?"

"I am teaching you plenty."

"No you're not! I haven't learned any new jutsu."

"So you win a battle strictly with jutsu?"

"… No, but-."

"So I should just hand you everything because you're throwing a temper tantrum?"

"You should be acting like a teacher!"

"You mean like Kakashi?" The harsh way Jiraiya spoke the question made Naruto step back. "I mean aside from learning how to chase a cat all you learned from him was a basic chakra exercise."

"Don't insult Kakashi-Sensei! This isn't about him its you. I'm your apprentice and I've finally got a teacher focused just on me. I don't want to waste it."

"Fine, then I'll give you a test. If you pass, I'll teach you every last jutsu I know. If you fail, you do as I tell you without complaint."

"Deal!"

Jiraiya smirked as Naruto crossed his arms and glared up at him defiantly.

"Alright, your teammate has been captured. Let's say it's that Hyuga girl."

"Hinata?"

"Yeah her, let's say she's been captured by a group of missing nin. You catch up to them at an abandoned building. You enter to find them surrounding her. She's beaten and dying. What do you do?"

"I'd tear them apart!" Naruto's eyes flickered red for the briefest of seconds. "No one harms one of my friends and gets away with it."

"Congratulations Naruto!" Jiraiya smiled and Naruto beamed triumphantly. "You didn't notice the traps you set off as you charged in. The rest of your team was caught up in them and killed. Also, other ninja ambush you from the shadows. You've killed everyone."

Naruto blinked in surprise as a mix of emotions washed across his face. It finally settled on anger.

"That's not fair! You never said there were traps or teammates! You cheated."

"You never asked!" Jiraiya let his chakra spike slightly to calm his student down. "Just like in a real mission, you let your emotions get ahead of you and jumped in. I admire your determination to protect and save your friends Naruto, but the fact is you are too hot headed. You are oblivious to everything unless it's bright and flashing."

"I am not."

"Really? Then tell me everything you know about your Kage Bunshin technique."

"I've already recited what you've told me a hundred times."

"What about what I haven't told you?"

"Huh?"

Naruto scratched his head and scrunched up his face in concentration. What didn't he know about his clones? He made them in various amounts and gave them commands. They were solid and could cause actual damage. There wasn't anything else.

"Stumped aren't you? Tell you what, you figure it out and then we'll talk about teaching you more." Naruto hung his head dejectedly and Jiraiya placed his hand on his shoulder. "You have potential Naruto, but first you must start thinking and acting like a ninja. I'm not telling you to change who you are. You never would anyway, but you must fix some of your flaws. What makes a Hokage respected isn't their strength. It is their wisdom. That is what you must gain."

Naruto nodded sadly and Jiraiya gave a small smile and turned. They started to walk through the woods to the next town. Naruto's eyes never left the ground. His mind on one thought. What didn't he know about Kage Bunshin?

Authors Notes:

So here it is, my version of Naruto. I will attempt to post every Saturday night in addition to Kloban.

Please Review, I happily accept criticism as long as it is the kind that will help me improve.

Waves

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NARUTO ASUNDER

CHAPTER 1:

THREE YEARS LATER

"I'm back Konoha!" Naruto leapt high into the air and looked down at his home. The village seemed almost serene, a far cry from what it had been when he left. It had been prosperous under Tsunade's command. "You haven't changed at all!"

He did a few flips and landed down next to Jiraiya. His excitement was nearly boiling over as he looked around. It was so great to be home! The three years with Jiraiya had been fun, and extremely beneficial, but he missed his friends. He glanced around as the people of Konoha stared at him. The number of glares had decreased substantially. Now it was more a matter of either indifference or mild curiosity.

"We need to go talk to Tsunade gaki. We're back a day late after all," Jiraiya said as he turned down the road towards the tower.

"Okay, man I can't wait to see everyone!"

"I can't wait to be rid of you for some silence for a change." Jiraiya smirked as Naruto sputtered in mock rage.

"You just want to go peek on woman again you blasted pervert."

"Bah, how many times have I told you it's research?"

Naruto stuck out his tongue and then a big fox like grin stretched across his face. He darted forward and Jiraiya barely had time to dodge out of the way. The Sannin raised an eyebrow and then quickly paled as Naruto fanned himself with a few of the sage's notes.

"Neh Ero-Sensei, I think we should burn these and return the dignity of females everywhere."

"Naruto." Jiraiya stalked closer towards his pupil. "Give those back to me."

"Then you better get to me before I get to Baa-chan."

Naruto disappeared in a swirl of leaves and the Sannin cursed.

Naruto jumped from rooftop to rooftop as he pushed himself as fast as he could. He knew his sensei would have him in very little time. Even after three years, it was still necessary for him to have a ten second head start to stay ahead of his mentor. He only had four right now. He smiled as he saw the tower come into view and forced chakra into his feet. He could make it.

A chill ran up his spine and he glanced behind his shoulder as a shadow covered him. Jiraiya flew through the air like a pouncing lion. His face contorted into a demonic visage. Naruto gulped as he let out an extra pulse of chakra from his feet and blasted off the roof. He rocketed toward the tower not bothering to head for the stairs. Sucking in a breath, he tucked into a ball and crashed through the window to the Hokage's office. He rolled onto his feet, but was immediately grabbed by Jiraiya.

"Give me back my precious research you brat!"

"Never!"

They struggled back and forth until a fist caught the sage in the head and sent him flying through the opposite wall. Naruto turned toward a

wrathful Tsunade and a nervous sweat broke out on his forehead. The notes should calm her down, wait the notes! He glanced down at his empty hands. The blasted pervert had still managed to get them… damn. He glanced up slowly at the frowning Hokage and gave a nervous smile as he scratched the back of his head.

"Hey Baa-chan, how have you been?" Naruto was ready to bolt if he so much as saw her arm twitch. Of course, she was shaking in rage so it would be rather difficult.

"Brat, what the hell do you think you were doing?"

"I just wanted to see you is all… and keep Ero-Sensei's notes away from him."

Her anger seemed to dissipate into thin air as she sighed and wandered back around her desk. She collapsed into her chair tiredly and rested her chin in her palm. She glanced at him up and down then smirked.

"Well at least you're not as much of a shrimp anymore. So, with Jiraiya passed out somewhere, fill me in on your training."

"Wouldn't you rather see me in action? I kind of want to show off a little."

"There's no time. We just received word from Suna. Their Kazekage has been kidnapped by the Akatsuki and they request assistance in the rescue. I need to know if you are up to the mission."

"Why would the Akatsuki… wait Gaara's the Kazekage!" He ignored the look on her face. It was like she was surprised he put two and two together. Was he really that bad before? Shaking his head, he focused on his foreign friend. Was he supposed to be happy or jealous. He hoped that Gaara being the Kazekage meant he was accepted by the people… or Shukaku's container went crazy again and forced the people to serve him. He shrugged. Gaara was okay now so he was sure it was the former… well mostly sure.

"Yes he is, and we need to send a team immediately. I would like you to go if you are capable."

"He is," Jiraiya said as he stumbled back through the hole he had come in. "He'll be a big help."

"Very well. Naruto Uzumaki, you are to join Sakura Haruno and Kakashi Hatake in the retrieval of the Kazekage. Kakashi is the lead understood?"

Naruto grinned at the mention of his old team. The Akatsuki didn't stand a chance.

"You got it. Where do we meet up?"

"They should be at the village gates by now. They are waiting for another member. Dismissed."

Naruto snapped into a mock salute and shot through the window as Jiraiya fell into a chair.

"Is he ready?" Tsunade asked as she pulled out a small bottle of sake and two cups.

"He still has lots of room to improve and is still our hyperactive Naruto." He took the glass she offered him. "But the Akastuki should be surprised. Hopefully, Hatake will let him actually do something."

"You sound annoyed with him."

"Hime, I had to spend the first year and a half either teaching or fixing things that should have been taken care of by the end of the academy, but especially by his jounin instructor. I don't fault Hatake and would still recommend him as a Hokage if the need arose, but as far as I'm concerned, he failed miserably as Naruto's teacher, even if the gaki still admires him."

"I see. So Naruto still will obey Kakashi?"

"Of course, I don't think it is possible for him to harbor ill will towards someone. But, I want him to be able to show everyone what he is capable of now that he's had a real teacher."

Naruto's grin threatened to split his face when he leapt over the last roof top and spotted two familiar heads of pink and silver hair. A surge of determination flooded through him even as his happy smile remained. Soon team seven would be complete again, he would finally make good on his promise. He landed and continued to run forward as his face became more serious. However, he needed to rescue Gaara first.

"Hey what are you guys standing around for? We've got a Kazekage to save!" Naruto said as he blasted by them without slowing down.

The two blinked in shock before they took off after him. He lessened his speed slightly in order to allow them to catch up. His grin never faded as Sakura and his teacher quickly caught up to him.

"Yo Naruto," Kakashi said as he came up on the blonde's left. "It's been a while."

"Yeah it has," Naruto said as he leapt up into the trees. "Sorry for the rush, but Baa-chan just told me about Gaara. We really need to get to him."

Naruto flipped in the air as a gloved fist rushed towards where his head had been a moment before.

"Don't ignore me baka!" Sakura clenched her fist as a small vein pulsed on her forehead.

He landed on a branch and pushed forward again. His pace never faltered as he righted his direction. He glanced back her with a sheepish grin.

"Sorry Sakura-chan, I'm just really concerned about Gaara and really excited about being with you guys again. I wasn't even back in Konoha for ten minutes before I was assigned this mission. I'm kind of buzzing with energy right now."

"You can't even say hello first? Naruto, you haven't changed at all."

Naruto just chuckled and turned back to Kakashi. He desperately wanted to catch up, but he was worried. From what Ero-Sennin had told him, the containers died when the beast was extracted. He didn't know how long ago they had started on Gaara, and it hurt his head to try and figure it out, but he trusted his gut. They still had a chance, but they didn't have any time to waste.

"What's the plan sensei?"

"Kankuro has been badly poisoned by Gaara's captors. We need to go to Suna first and get our information there before going after Gaara."

"But, hasn't it already been several days? Every minute we waste means the Akatsuki has more time to extract Gaara's demon. It will kill him if that happens!"

"I know Naruto, but Sakura is the only one capable of healing Kankuro and you and I are not enough to take on two S-class ninjas."

Naruto frowned angrily. He couldn't let Gaara die alone. No, they had both had too much of that in their lives. He wouldn't let a bunch of power hungry bastards ruin everything his friend had gained. He looked at Kakashi with a firm gaze even as his eyes pleaded with the older man.

"We can't let Gaara die. I won't let that happen even if there are a hundred S-class ninjas."

"I know Gaara is your friend Naruto, but Kakashi-sensei is right. You can't just charge in."

"I know, but-." Naruto gripped at his stomach. "I understand Gaara. I'm a Jinchuriki like him… and like him, our greatest fear and pain is to be alone. If we don't get there… if we don't he will die thinking everyone abandoned him. I refuse to let that happen. There has to be a way to save him without wasting time."

The group fell silent as Naruto's words sunk in. He had his hands clenched in a fist and only relaxed when Sakura gave him a comforting smile. Kakashi sighed and increased his speed.

"Pakkun may be able to remember Gaara's scent from the time we came across the battlefield he had fought the bone user on. However, even if we do track them, we stand little chance defeating them."

"We don't have to beat them right?" Naruto asked now that he had caught up and matched the pace of his old teacher. "I could create a massive diversion and draw them out, while you sneak Gaara away. By the time they realized what happened, we could have all of Suna as back up."

Kakashi stared at Naruto intently as if he was measuring his old student's merit. Naruto stared right back as his eyes shown in determination. He would go after Gaara by himself if he had to.

"There are a lot of holes in your plan, but it does have some potential. Just remember, they are after you as well," Kakashi sprinted off ahead and started forming hand signs to summon Pakkun.

"Naruto," Sakura said softly. "About what you said…"

"Yeah, I figured you already knew about the fox in my gut." He turned around and gave her his biggest smile. "No worries Sakura-chan, there's no way I could be lonely with you and everyone else around."

She smiled happily and gave him a nod.

He pushed a small amount of chakra into his feet and launched himself forward to catch up with Kakashi. He'd have to ask Sakura out to ramen when they got back. But first, he had some missing-nin to take care of.

Naruto forced himself to keep his breathing even as his clone spun the energy on his palm. He always found the Rasengan to be relaxing once he had mastered it. His hand had long ago become use to the strain of the technique. Over the past three years, he had trained it to the point he could summon it up with ease. The result made the chakra swirling on his hand feel warm and even gentle. Although, he knew if he lost control, it would explode. Regardless, it was a soothing technique. However, that was only the case with a normal Rasengan. What he was doing now was causing his arm to shake and his fingers cramp.

The Odama Rasengan was a technique that had over three times as much chakra and force as a regular Rasengan. It also required three times the control. He remembered the first time he had tried the technique, he had snapped his elbow backwards when it hit the target. It had been one of the few times he had ever seen Ero-Sennin scared. Appartently, the sage hadn't been able to see Naruto himself… only the crater from the failed attempt.

Naruto focused his thoughts on the stone wall in front of him. Kakashi was hiding off somewhere preparing to jump in at a moments notice. Naruto himself was standing on top of the sealed entrance. They had been distraught when they found there was no way to get through without removing all of the seal tags. However, Naruto figured if they couldn't go through, he would just go around. It was only rock after all. He just prayed Gaara was far enough back from the explosion.

"Ready to go boss," the clone said and disappeared. Naruto grinned.

"Odama Rasengan!"

He thrust his palm forward and narrowed his eyes as it chewed through the stone of the mountain. He grabbed his wrist to keep his arm steady. It couldn't be allowed to blow just yet. His hand just needed to go a little further. He clenched his teeth as he felt the technique start to wobble. The Odama wasn't something made for prolonged use it was a quick shot, but he knew that if he didn't push it in far enough, then it wouldn't work. He looked and saw his hand was now far enough in the mountain. With a quick prayer, he released his hand on the chakra orb and hopped back.

The mountainside exploded in a rush of smoke and stone shrapnel. A grin spread across his face as he shielded it with his arm. Perhaps, the technique worked too well? He shook off the thought and jumped in through the smoke.

He landed on the cold stone ground and zipped forward straight to where Gaara was being suspended in the air by some kind of strange aura. He ignored the Akatsuki members' surprise and leapt straight for his friend, to hell with the field.

"Drop the technique! We must not let the nine tails be absorbed yet!" The center figure bellowed and dropped his hands.

The others did the same and the energy around Gaara disappeared and what was being ripped out of him was also stopped. Naruto grabbed Gaara in mid air and spun. As soon as he felt his feet touch the ground he pumped as much chakra into them as he could and blasted toward the exit. Foot sized craters were left in his wake.

He almost made it to the exit when a large scorpion like tail speared him right through the chest. He coughed up blood and dropped Gaara on the ground. Sasori came into view and lifted Naruto high into the air. The puppet user stared at the orange clad ninja curiously.

"What an obnoxious little brat, you really thought you could escape little Jinchuriki?" Sasori asked as he swung Naruto around.

"Nope," Naruto chuckled and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Taju Kage Bunshin no Jutsu," Naruto's voice echoed through the entire cavern. A thousand clones filled the cave and each one quickly created a spinning orb of chakra in their hands. "Uzumaki Naruto Nisen Rendan Rasengan Special!"

The clones launched themselves forward like giant orange missiles. They crashed into a shocked Sasori and Deidara and pelted the entire cavern. The rapid fire attack caused the cavern to shudder violently, and the noise was deafening. The explosions grew and tore away at the cavern walls until the entire cave collapsed… burying everything in it.

Naruto smirked as he watched the mountain collapse in on itself from the safety of the outside. Jiraiya would be proud at the fact that he did listen if it was important enough.

He turned and started to sprint through the forest. His gut told him that those two in the cave were still alive. They would be after him and probably pissed. He needed to get as close to Suna as possible for reinforcements. His clones, moments before they leveled the cave, had seen Gaara's body sink into the ground. It meant Kakashi had gotten him in time, but it also meant the copy-nin was going to be slowed down and most likely unable to fight. That was taken into account during planning, however his fatigue was not.

Unfortunately, his Kage Bunshin and Rasengan combo was extremely tiring. It was great for dealing with enemies of unknown strength and ability. But, combined with the Odama Rasengan, he knew he needed some time to rest. It was also troubling that he had to possibly fight both those guys. He still had no idea what they could do, although the tail from the one was going to be a pain by itself. He

was concerned that he may end up having to use… that. No, he'd almost rather die than use that… almost.

He winced as the sound of an explosion echoed from where he had just come from. It meant at least one of them had gotten loose. He slowed himself down a little. There was no point in tiring himself out if they would catch him anyway. He dropped down from the trees and hid himself in the underbrush. Hopefully, he could recover in time. If he was extremely lucky, they would miss him entirely, but he doubted that would happen.

The seconds ticked by agonizingly slow. He ignored the part of him that demanded he charge out there and shout out his name and tell them off. The part of him Jiraiya had created realized that they probably wouldn't give him the chance to finish his speech. He froze when he heard the flapping of wings and the snapping of twigs on the forest floor. So both of them had survived… damn.

"I can't believe he destroyed my Hiruko and forced me to shield us using my hundred puppet art, which you carelessly destroyed," Sasori said as he leapt up onto the branch. His wooden joints clicked with every movement.

"He just understands that art is fleeting, and I had to blow up the puppets or else we'd still be trapped below yeah? You're the one who hates waiting after all," Deidara said as he stood on top of his giant clay bird.

"Perhaps after the nine tails is removed I will use the boy as a puppet. He does seem to be fairly powerful, but terribly foolish."

So, this guy is a puppet user like Gaara's brother, Naruto thought. I wonder what the other guy uses?

"The one tail has also escaped. Do you think the other intruders could have gotten there that fast?"

"It is doubtful. I do not know how the blonde Jinchuriki escaped our detection, but that is irrelevant. We must find both the containers quickly. I don't want to keep the leader waiting."

"We should split up then."

"And ruin all the fun?" Naruto asked as he jumped out of the brush behind them. "I'm more than enough to keep you losers entertained!"

The two turned toward him and he grinned confidently. It was to big a risk to let them split up and get caught up with Kakashi and Gaara. He'd just have to deal with them himself. It shouldn't be too hard. They were only two S-class missing-nin.

"Let's have a blast then!" Deidara made a small clay bird and flung it.

Naruto dodged and yelped as the ground erupted where he had just been standing. He flipped and stuck to the trunk of the closest tree. He scowled. A bomb maker would be a pain. Sasori turned toward the explosives expert.

"You already caught your Jinchuriki. Do not be greedy Deidara."

"You move too slow with your terrible art. You do not deserve to capture him."

"Hey, don't ignore me you bastards! Both your art sucks!"

Naruto grinned even as the hair stood up on the back of his neck and the temperature of the area dropped ten degrees. Well, he had wanted to get their attention. He flicked the kunai out from under his sleeve and held it out in front of him. His eyes focused on the redhead. His scent seemed off… not living. The body of the puppeteer itself seemed fake and reeked of poison. If it was another puppet, he would be the bigger problem of the two.

Naruto crossed his fingers in front of him and made two clones. They rushed forward as he pushed his chakra into the kunai. He wasn't as

proficient with the wind element as he would have liked. It was the last thing Jiraiya had worked with him on and it had only been a week ago. He had hoped to find someone in Konoha to help him with it, since he was only guessing at how to do it properly and Jiraiya could only hint at what he should be doing. Nevertheless, he needed that cutting power now.

Naruto focused as the chakra formed around the blade and manifested as an extension. He kept his concentration on that and reached into his back pouch. He gripped the thin piece of paper he was looking for and pulled it out. It was a custom made exploding tag. Jiraiya had taught him a lot about seals and this had been his first solo project. If it worked, the puppeteer was done… well everything within twenty square feet was done.

He flung the kunai as hard as he could. It made a soft whistle as it flew though the air while the clones blocked Sasori's line of sight with their distractions. The puppet master never saw the kunai and tag until it ripped through one of the clones and pierced his body. Sasori looked down in surprise for an instant before the tag blew.

Fire exploded everywhere and turned everything to blackened ash. Naruto was sent flying backwards through the woods. His body bounced and crashed through multiple tree branches. The wind element of his kunai fanned the flames hotter and Naruto was concerned he would be burned alive. He hadn't thought about the consequences of mixing air and flame.

His back slammed into the ground knocking the wind out of him and he let out a pained groan as his vision swam. He didn't even bother trying to move. His body wouldn't have listened anyways. His clothes were still smoking from the intense heat and his ears were ringing. If he lived, he would make sure to do a better job at limiting seal power in the future. After all, he would never become Hokage if he blew himself up.

His breath caught in his throat as he heard someone cough. They survived? He struggled to look up at the noise. Dread weld up within

his gut as the two Akatsuki staggered out from the diminishing flame. They both looked worse for wear, but they could still move. He wasn't sure if he could without using that.

Deidara's left arm looked like it had been burned down to a nub and his face was scorched horribly. Sasori's body had melted and burned except for where he had his arms crossed over the left side of his chest. Naruto chuckled weakly. He'd got them good, and if he could move he'd know how to kill Sasori. The bastard was protecting his heart. It was the only place he was protecting.

He fought to get up as the two stood over him. Deidara grinned sadistically, while Naruto could feel the anger rolling off the melted remains of Sasori.

"That was a beautiful explosion brat, but allow me to show you the art-." Deidara's rant was cut short as a large amount of sand wrapped around his head and crushed it in one sickening squelch. Naruto's eyes widened as the headless body dropped to the ground and never moved again.

Sasori didn't even have time to react as a lightning charged hand burst through his heart. His one good eye drifted down passively and staggered for a minute before he collapsed to his knees. He slowly looked back up at Naruto as the doll like eye wavered uncontrollably.

"How disappointing of me to be defeated so easily by a brat and a sneak attack. I truly deserve this death for being caught off guard so easily. Perhaps, I secretly wished to die. Although, you were surprising and perhaps even slightly skillful." Sasori paused his rambling and seemed to regain control of his eye. He focused it squarely on Naruto. "You have managed to kill me. Something not even the undefeatable third Kazekage was able to do. As a reward Konoha-nin, I will tell you where Orochimaru will be in eight days. I was supposed to meet a spy of mine at the Tenchi Bridge in Kusagakure. What you do with this information is up to you."

"What time?" Naruto asked desperately as hope welled up within him. This was his chance to find Sasuke. He could deliver upon his promise and bring his brother home. He felt despair wash over him as the puppeteer didn't answer. "What time you bastard?"

"He's dead Naruto," Kakashi said as Gaara trudged out from behind the tree. Naruto's fist clenched as he remained helplessly on the ground. "You know you almost blew us up along with them, right?"

Kakashi's eye turned up in a U as he reached down and picked Naruto up off the ground.

"You have not changed Naruto Uzumaki," Gaara said. He looked pale and weak, but alive.

Naruto grinned.

"Gaara, you're alright!"

"Yes. I can no longer sense Shukaku in my mind, but his chakra still circles in my body. I am not sure what this means."

"I think Naruto's interruption of their unsealing halted the extraction. Basically, they didn't get all of Shukaku out of you. Fortunately, it looks like it was the demon's consciousness that was taken out of you not its power."

Gaara blinked slowly and looked like he was searching around in his head for something. He finally leveled his eyes at Kakashi and nodded.

"I agree with your theory. Let us hope that they do not need to come back for the chakra and that Shukaku himself was enough to satisfy their needs. While it is regrettable, they would be one step closer to their goal. I would hate for my village to be a constant target because of me. I have caused my home enough problems over the years."

Naruto smiled sadly as his friend started to shakily walk back to Suna. Kakashi began to pull him along in the same direction. Would the Akatsuki attack Konoha to get to him? How many people would die for the Akatsuki to get to him? How many people would die trying to protect him?

"Don't worry Naruto. As long as we work together everyone will stay safe," Kakashi said through his mask. He glanced over at his old student. "Let's just keep the unstable exploding tags in your pouch."

Naruto smiled gratefully at his sensei. Yes, everyone was strong together. He'd just have to make sure to keep getting stronger.

"Aw but Kakashi-sensei that was awesome!"

"Well you would be able to take out almost any Akatsuki member," Kakashi said thoughtfully. "But, you would also take out the rest of the landscape."

Naruto pouted. The tags weren't that bad.

Authors Notes:

Please review. Also, please feel free to visit the main site for completely original content.

A quick question. Do any of you want me to describe the techniques used in the chapter in this section?

Tidal

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Naruto Asunder

Chapter 2:

Hinata Hyuga felt she had grown tremendously over the past three years. Of course, she had kept this growth a secret from everyone, even her own teammates. She decided three years ago that her plan would be to catch the Elder and his minions off guard. After years of harsh training, she believed that her new strength would allow this to become a reality. There had been one other benefit to the secrets and training. She had also grown in confidence. She was still quiet and preferred to remain in the background, but her stutter was gone. However, these were qualities that she hid. Her primary effort had been to show a natural progression of ability based on other peoples' assumptions. For her plan to work, everyone had to view her as a timid weakling still struggling to become something she would never be. It made everything she had learned just that much harder to hide.

However, all of the growth and all of the confidence had disappeared as soon as she had locked eyes with the blue ones of the person she cared for more than anyone else. It had taken only a simple greeting from him for all her bad habits to rush back… and result in her passing out in the middle of the street. Had she been anyone else she would have cursed aloud. Instead, she just laid there passed out and lost in her thoughts, extremely happy just being able to see him again… even if she couldn't bring herself to say anything other than "eep."

She had been one of the first people to know about Naruto's success in rescuing the Kazekage even before it had been the talk of the

village alongside with Rock Lee's victory over the Itachi Uchiha imposter. She had been so happy that people were finally speaking of Naruto with respect and admiration. He deserved it more than anyone she knew. She had been disappointed that she hadn't seen him when he first returned, but Lady Tsunade had reassured her that Naruto hadn't been in the village for longer than a few minutes. Of course, the Hokage had then gone on to tease Hinata mercilessly. Although, Tsunade's teasing wasn't anything new to Hinata, it was one of the conditions for being her secret student.

She felt herself stir as a soft breeze pulled at her long hair. Someone was carrying her on their back. Her eyes cracked open tentatively and were filled by blonde and orange. She felt her breathe catch. Naruto-kun was carrying her! She forced herself to breathe evenly. She didn't spend three years of hellish training just to pass out every time he came within shouting distance.

"Naruto-kun… could you please put me down?"

He glanced back with concerned eyes.

"You sure? You're not going to pass out again right? Because we're not that much farther from the hospital."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'll be fine I just got a little dizzy… thank you."

He slowed down and landed on the roof gently. He let her go and she stepped back away from him as she fought to keep the blush on her face unnoticeable. She wasn't the shy, dark, and weird girl anymore. She was the shy, dark, and powerful ninja. However, the way he kept looking at her with so much concern made her feel like some pathetic love struck teenager and for the life of her she couldn't be completely angry with that.

"Are you sure you will be okay? I really don't mind."

"No, I'm okay. It is good to see you again. You look like you've grown a lot Naruto-kun."

"You think so?" He scratched the back of his head and grinned. "You've changed a lot too. You're prettier than I remember."

Was he trying to make her pass out again?

"Th- thank you Naruto-kun."

Silence fell between the two of them and her mind raced. She wanted to talk to him about everything, but she couldn't pick what to start with.

"Well… it was nice seeing you again. I guess I'll get going then." Naruto turned to leave and she felt herself begin to panic.

"Naruto-kun would you… would you like to go have lunch?"

Dread welled up within her. How could she just blurt something out like that? He was probably busy and… and. Her thoughts ended when he turned back around and grinned brilliantly.

"Sure! I was just on my way to go get some ramen. I haven't had that in ages. It'd be great to have some company."

She nodded as confidence began to build within her and she ran forward. She flew right past him and he blinked confusedly before he took off after her. They bounced from rooftop to rooftop and constantly increased their speed. She wasn't sure when exactly, but at some point they had started an unspoken race. It was one she wasn't going to lose.

To the untrained eye, they appeared as orange and lavender bolts hurtling through the sky. Hinata felt herself smiling. It was the most fun she had had in memory. Racing and roughhousing weren't tolerated in a Hyuga home after all. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she liked Naruto, he brought out a sense of childlike excitement in everyone. It was infectious.

They landed on the pavement at the exact same time. She looked back at him. He was grinning the same way she assumed she was. It was a tie.

"You've gotten pretty fast Hinata."

"You as well Naruto-kun. Shall we go eat?"

He nodded and they sat down at a pair of vacant stools. Teuchi walked out from the back.

"Back again Naruto? This is your fourth time it two days. I don't mind, but I figured you would have expanded your diet a little," the ramen chef said.

"I haven't had a good bowl of ramen in three years old man. I'm just spoiling myself a bit."

"As I said I don't mind, I assume you want the usual?" Naruto nodded. "And you miss?"

"I'll just have a bowl of chicken ramen please."

"Alright, I'll have your order soon."

He left into the back without another word. Hinata steeled herself and decided to start the conversation on a strong note.

"Naruto-kun."

"Yeah."

"Do you have a break from missions any time soon?"

"We're planning one right now, but I have until next week. Why?"

"I want to have a sparring match with you. Would you be willing to?"

She held her breath as he tilted his head to the side. What would happen if he said no? Oh God, he probably thought that she had turned into some kind of blood thirsty killer. He would never speak with her again!

"Sure no problem, but why me?"

She prayed he never noticed the relieved breath she took.

"I am just curious about a few things."

Rock Lee stood in the center of his favorite training ground. It was about as far away from the village as someone could be while remaining in Konohagakure. It allowed him to be as loud and destructive as he needed to be. The strange Anbu-san would also sweep around the area every so often and help the trees that were destroyed re-grow. He was grateful for that. He hated destroying things, but it was necessary much of the time. Although, it was less so now that he was in control of his abilities.

He started to stretch out his legs. Naruto would be here soon and in case they decided to spar he wanted to be warmed up. He had asked Naruto to come by to talk. Lee had many things he wished to talk about with his blonde friend. He would have talked when they met up at Suna or the trip back, but Naruto's time was capitalized by Sakura and then of course he had to race Gai-Sensei home.

The sound of feet impacting the earth pricked at his ears. He looked up as Naruto walked out into the open field.

"Good morning Naruto-kun, thank you very much for meeting with me."

"No problem Fuzzy Brows, so what did you want?"

"I wished to speak with you on several matters. I also wanted to see how much stronger you have become. From what I see, your flames

of youth have grown a great deal."

"You bet they have! And what about you? I overheard you fought with an imposter of Sasuke's brother. What was that all about?"

Lee sat down and motioned for Naruto to do the same.

"Yosh! It was a most youthful and impressive battle! It was only dampened slightly by the sad truth that it was a fake missing-nin. However, I will still elaborate upon this most wonderful battle!"

"Huh?"

"Neji-kun and I split off from Tenten-chan and Gai-sensei on our way to Suna. We were ordered to provide backup for you by Tsunade-sama. On our way there we were ambushed by someone pretending to be the missing-nin Itachi Uchiha. Unfortunately, he caught my teammate by surprise and caught him in a genjutsu. However, I was able to use my superior speed to crush him into the ground in a single blow. I was later told that the man possessed a mere fraction of the real Uchiha's ability."

"How come you weren't trapped in the genjutsu?"

Lee's bright smile seemed to grow to the point it was radiating its own form of light.

"As you know, I am unable to use genjutsu or ninjutsu. It has been recently revealed through Tsunade-sama's research that I have far more spiritual energy than physical. This prevents my body from mixing them correctly and thus it cannot create stable chakra. The benefit of this is that I am immune to genjutsu!"

"What how is that possible?"

"Genjutsu essentially takes control of the chakra inside a person's mind and uses it against them. What little chakra I have is so chaotic

that it makes it impossible for someone to control. My past struggles have resulted in this most youthful gift!"

"Wow that's awesome Fuzzy Brows!" Naruto smiled excitedly and then glanced down at the flask attached to Lee's hip. He pointed. "What's that thing?"

"This?" Lee looked down and grasped it. "Forgive me Naruto-kun, but I would like to keep it a secret for now. I promise I will reveal it to you someday."

Naruto tilted his head to the side and frowned as he stared at the flask. Lee assumed it would probably drive the blonde nuts… good it would make him a dependable sparring partner.

"I take it you want to spar, but is there anything else you want to talk about?" Naruto asked.

"Yes, first I wanted to apologize to you." Lee placed his head on the ground. "I am very sorry Naruto-kun."

"Whoa easy Lee, what do you have to apologize about?"

"In my training and promotion to Jonin, I have been made aware of your burden and some of the hardships you endured as a child. As a fellow dead last, I should have been a better friend. I am also ashamed that I was passed from the academy because of Gai-Sensei's request, where as you had to struggle alone. It was most un-youthful of me."

Lee kept his head down. When he had been made a Jonin, he was told of many of the village's potential threats. The greatest was the Akatsuki. He had been surprised to hear about the Kyubi being held by Naruto. At first, he had left it at what it was, but he found he could not put it out of his mind. The foremost question in his mind had been what was it like for Naruto to hold the most powerful of creatures? It had led him on a quest to discover more about him. The more he learned about Naruto's life, the guiltier he had become.

Lee had been disgusted at how he had at one point felt sorry for himself and almost quit, considering his life was so much easier in comparison to Naruto's. He had Gai-Sensei, where as his friend had not. He had sworn then and there that he would be a good friend to Naruto. As someone who also new the pain of being ignored, Lee would not allow anyone to feel the same thing.

Naruto waved his hands in embarrassment and shook his head.

"Come on Lee that's enough of that! You had no way of knowing, and this sad stuff isn't like you! Don't be upset, just work harder to do better right?" Naruto stood up and brushed himself off. "Now how about that spar?"

Lee was on his feet in an instant and his infamous nice guy pose was at full power. He flicked his weights off and charged forward.

They said you could hear the explosions in the center of the village, almost three miles away.

Tsunade folded her hands in front of her face as her brown eyes drifted back to her treacherous assistant and the two old farts sitting pompously in front of her. It was moments like this where she wished Konoha was ran with a more militaristic methodology. She could have everyone in the room beheaded for treason without any further justification than they annoyed her. Well, she wouldn't behead Tonton and maybe not Shizune… maybe.

"What do you want Homura, Koharu?"

"You should address us with more respect Tsunade," Koharu said and Tsunade could barely repress the urge to roll her eyes.

"We would like to discuss Naruto Uzumaki. Your apprentice has voiced her concerns of you assigning missions to him. Specifically, missions that place him in danger of being captured by the Akatsuki," Homura said.

Shizune flinched as Tsunade's eyes moved over to her. Tsunade was not pleased. She knew her apprentice had her heart in the right place, but she did not approve of involving the elders. It meant the old dog of war would be sniffing around soon. There were enough problems in the village and ninja world without a bunch of people who refusee to retire messing up the works.

"My former apprentice's concerns are misplaced. Naruto Uzumaki is an extremely capable ninja, and a huge benefit to this village's forces. It would be unwise to be selective of missions where he could be a huge asset," Tsunade said.

"Regardless of his abilities, he is the container of the Kyubi and thus he should be restricted to the village where he can be protected," Homura pressed.

"He was instrumental in the success of the mission to rescue the Kazekage and directly responsible for the defeat of two S-class ninja. You want him limited to the village and I assume shadowed by a protective unit that is most likely weaker than he is?"

"Again his abilities are irrelevant. It is what he contains-."

"What I contain isn't your problem you old fart!" Naruto hopped in through the window to the office. He looked like he had been used to plow a field. Dirt and torn clothes hung to his still sweating body. His intense gaze settled on the two elders and then drifted over to Tsunade. "Sorry I'm late Baa-chan. My sparring session with Lee got a little carried away."

"You are interrupting Uzumaki. You are not needed here so please come back at another time," Koharu said. Her voice was terse and left no room for argument. Tsunade had to fight back a smirk. They didn't know Naruto. With that tone of voice, Koharu might as well have challenged him to a fight.

"You're talking about me so I damn well am needed here. Who the hell are you old farts anyway?"

"People who you should respect, now leave genin."

"You sure you just didn't get lost in a senile moment?" He walked up to Tsunade. "Jeez Baa-chan, if you're taking advise from people this ancient and senile then Konoha is in trouble."

She stole a quick glance over at the two elders. Their normally calm demeanor was starting to crack. Their stiff posture and rapidly tightening jaw demonstrated they were barely suppressing their outrage. The ghost of a grin tugged at her lips. Naruto seemed to have that effect on people.

"You should shut your insolent mouth boy. You never know who would be willing to do it for you."

Tsunade bit back a curse as she looked over at the door. Danzo stood there arrogantly as he stared Naruto down. She noticed Naruto's lips curl up into a snarl. The old fools didn't realize that the harder you push the brat the more he retaliates.

"Is that a threat you old bastard?"

"It is a statement. Read into it however much you would like."

Tsunade sighed. This was going to explode soon. As much as she enjoyed Naruto's energy in this environment, it wasn't going to make anything better right now. She would have to compromise.

"I refuse to limit Naruto to the village. If you are so concerned about him being out on missions, then I am open to suggestions." She ignored the annoyed look Naruto gave her.

"Your personal feelings for this child allow him far more freedoms than he should be allowed," Danzo said.

"My freedom is none of your business!"

"That's enough Naruto!" Tsunade gave a warning look. "I wanted to talk to you about your last mission, but it seems we will not be able

to. Besides, don't you have another appointment to get to soon?"

Naruto looked at her in surprise before he nodded. He stuck his tongue out at the elders, gave them the finger, and leapt out the window. She was amazed at how many traits he had picked up from Jiraiya. It was also impressive at how he was still the same loud and thick Naruto, but he had some intelligence hidden deep within… very hidden. However, he was shaping up to be a fine man and a great Hokage. Her secret student had better work quickly or else she'd end up fighting off half of the village.

She turned back to the elders. Now how did she deal with them?

Naruto landed silently on the grass as the sun beat down overhead. He cracked his neck. What on Earth was he thinking scheduling two sparring matches in one day? Granted, the match with Lee was far more intense than he had planned, and he had already recovered… even if he did smell terrible and looked like a hobo. Oh well, it wasn't like he was going out to eat.

He glanced around and spotted Hinata kneeling quietly under a tree. She seemed completely peaceful. He wandered over to her and looked around his surroundings. There was a large gentle river running through the center of the grounds. It was a pretty tranquil place. It kind of made him just want to stretch out and enjoy the day.

"Hello, Naruto-kun," Hinata said without opening her eyes. "Are you ready to get started?"

"I guess. How intense do you want the match to get?"

Hinata sighed and stood up. Without saying a word, she walked out onto the river and look down through the water. Suddenly, she kicked the water hard and a wall almost twenty feet high rose up. She looked right at him and thrust her palm into it. The water exploded forward in a huge blast and surged forward for a few hundred feet before it settled back into the water.

"I want a fight Naruto. If you hold back you're going to get hurt."

Naruto gulped and fell back into a fighting stance. She had moved the water by sheer force of her chakra alone. It wasn't a technique, just pure chakra. He knew from the speed of the water that it would have hurt to have been hit by it and fatal if it was directly from her palm. She had done it so effortlessly as well. He wasn't sure whether it was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen… or the hottest.

He shook the thought from his head and formed a Rasengan in his right hand. It had taken him close to a month after he had finally realized how much he lacked, but now he could summon the Rasengan without a clone and faster than even Jiraiya could. He rushed forward and shoved the swirling chakra straight at her. She wanted all out. She would get all out.

Hinata didn't try to dodge. Instead, she punched the Rasengan as waves a chakra rolled off her fist. The air seemed to shake as the two forces clashed violently. The water beneath them churned angrily and the trees waved back and forth like they were in a storm. Neither attack gave in to the other, it was a total stalemate.

Hinata spun and sent her palm flying into his jaw. He saw stars as he was lifted high into the air. She appeared in front of him and did a spinning back kick into his gut. He felt her chakra rush through him and he coughed up blood as he was rocketed backward. He flipped in the air and preformed a Shunshin. His chakra wrapped around his body and he fazed out. He almost instantly appeared behind her and sent both fists crashing down on her skull.

She spiraled down into the water and disappeared under its surface with a massive splash as he started to fall. He cursed. He had gotten caught up in the fight and hit her far harder than he should have. That one would need a definite apology. He was almost touching the water when a huge dragon took shape and raced towards him.

"Holy crap!" He used a Shunshin to zip out of the way an instant before the water dragon snapped its jaws shut.

He appeared on the ground and slid to a stop. He felt someone behind him and didn't have time to turn.

"Juho Soshiken!"

It felt as if two animals tore at his back and he was sent sprawling along the ground. He rolled to his feet and ignored the blood that trickled down his back. She was fast… almost as fast as Lee and just as devastating. The destructive power of her chakra and the complete control over it was awe inspiring. He guessed that she had as much chakra as he did normally… unless he used that. The way the fight was going. She may be able to even handle it. No, he wasn't going to use that unless needed.

She rushed him again in a blur of motion. He noticed she hadn't even activated her Byakugan yet. Good, he could use that to his advantage. He formed a clone behind the closest tree. He didn't need a hand sign for a single clone anymore and Jiraiya had forced him to learn how to summon the clone at a specific spot. He really wanted to thank his mentor right now. She pulled her hand back to strike and he used a Kawarimi to switch with his clone. He watched from behind the tree as she struck it and it exploded in a wave of fire.

She was sent tumbling back as the exploding tag he had left inside the clone went off. It was a regular tag so he doubted it would faze her for long. He flicked the kunai from his wrist holster into his hand and charged her. His assumption was proven correct as she was on her feet in an instant. They struck simultaneously and stopped their attacks at the last second. Her two chakra charged fingertips rested on his throat. His wind powered kunai on hers.

They stood there panting and staring at each other for what seemed like hours. Whether it was because of exhaustion, battle instinct, or something else he couldn't tell. However, slowly they both started to smile and then as more time passed they laughed. It had been another tie. They backed away from each other and collapsed onto the ground, yet the laughter did not entirely cease. Naruto wiped the sweat on his forehead onto his sleeve. Hinata's hands glowed green

and she placed them on top of her head. Naruto tilted his head to the side. Since when did she know a medical jutsu?

"Thank you Naruto-kun that was a lot of fun."

"I think we got a little carried away for a sparring match. You're kind of dangerous you know!"

He felt his cheeks redden slightly when she smiled at him. A grateful smile was not what he had expected. He was caught off guard at how happy she was for his words. It was obvious she had worked hard, and must be she appreciated his compliment. But, for someone of her abilities, she should be used to getting praised.

"So did you find out what was making you curious?" He asked.

"Not entirely." She rested her hands on her lap and looked down. Her joyful mood almost instantly became sad as she fisted her hands on the edge of her jacket. "I need your help Naruto-kun."

He perked up at this. She sounded desperate and had blurted out the last thing he had ever expected. The last time he had heard the same tone was when Sakura begged him to bring back Sasuke. Oh God, did one of her teammates run off? It was probably Kiba, no wait… don't jump to conclusions. How many times had he been yelled at for that?

"Hinata what's wrong?"

She looked up at him like she was startled from her inner thoughts. Tears threatened to fall, but she stubbornly refused to let them.

"My clan… my family is in trouble. You know of the Caged Bird Seal yes?"

He nodded. It was one of the things he wanted to fix when he became Hokage. It was his strict belief that no one should ever have

a seal placed on them unwillingly. The only exception was if it was to save the village… and even then it would be a last resort.

"My father has been trying to close the rift between the main and branch houses, but he has met a great deal of resistance by the Hyuga Elder and his loyal followers. He has fought to the best of his ability, but he can't anymore and has begun to cave in to their demands. I've spent the past three years trying to grow strong enough to become the heir, but I'm afraid Naruto. I'm afraid of what will happen to my little sister if I beat her and become the heir. I'm afraid what the Elder will do to Neji-nisan and the branch. I'm afraid that unless I'm head of the clan I will be powerless to stop him! But I don't have time for my father to retire because the Elder is acting now! I need help from powerful friends, not just to support me, but to fight against those who would have no problem inciting a civil war and slaughtering the branch members."

She was crying freely now and her shoulders shook with frustration. Naruto frowned. This must have been something she was fighting against alone for some time now. For her to finally talk about it must have been like a crack in a dam. It started as a trickle, but she couldn't stop it once it started. He leaned over to her and rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Have you told Baa-chan about this?"

"No." She shook her head sadly. "The Hokage is supposed to stay out of clan affairs until it becomes a threat to the village, and even then, it has to be in response to the actions, not preventative. I've trained so hard Naruto, but now that the time is drawing near I don't know what to do."

"Hey Hinata look at me." She sniffed and slowly lifted her head. He did the best foxy grin he could and prayed his confidence would transfer over to her. "The solution is simple Hinata. You just have to become the clan head!"

Authors Notes:

This chapter was a little shorter than I would have liked. By next Saturday I hope to have finally caught up on all of the writing I've been doing. I know the main site suffered this week and that two will be back up too full. See you in a week.

Flood

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 3:

Naruto considered himself to be a friendly person. He was always willing to help someone out and forgive them. However, this Sai guy his team had been saddled with was severely pushing the limits of his kindness. The pale newcomer just smiled that infuriatingly fake smile and tried to get a rise out of him and Sakura. To make matters worse, Kakashi-Sensei had been pulled for a solo mission and had been replaced with the strange Yamato guy. Naruto suspected Baa-chan had needed to compromise with those ancient idiots, but this was ridiculous. It didn't take a genius to realize the guy his age was there to keep tabs on him for Danzo… and he wasn't to sure about their current team leader either.

"I never took you for the quiet kind little boy," Sai said as he looked over to Naruto.

Naruto's eye twitched, but he kept walking forward. He wouldn't give into the taunt. He wouldn't.

"You seem so lost in thought."

Ignore him.

"Are you upset because you didn't take advantage of Hinata Hyuga?"

That's it!

"What the hell is your problem you annoying bastard?" Naruto whirled around as his eye twitched. "Are you trying to piss me off? And besides that, I was having a sparring match with a friend. Where the hell did you get an idea like that?"

Naruto ignored Sakura's surprised expression. He hadn't mentioned it to her yet. Quite frankly, he wasn't sure who to talk to about it. Hinata had made it clear that what they discussed was a secret.

"I'm just trying to make conversation. I was surprised because from what I've read it is recommended to make a move when a girl is upset and vulnerable. I mean she was sobbing about her family-."

Naruto had lunged forward and had a Rasengan formed in his hand before Sai could finish his sentence. Sai looked slightly surprised for a moment, but quickly went to reach for his tanto. Wood erupted from the ground and snared the two preventing them from moving an inch. Naruto didn't stop glaring.

"Shut up or I'll make you!"

"Big words, are you sure you can?"

"Enough you two," Yamato said as he walked up. "Teammates shouldn't attack each other."

"This asshole is talking about things he has no right to!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was a big secret. Forgive me for letting the cat out of the bag so to speak."

"Naruto what is he talking about?" Sakura asked.

Naruto bit back a curse as the wood loosened around him. He didn't want to lie to Sakura, but he didn't want to betray Hinata's trust. He sighed and looked at Sakura sadly.

"I'm sorry Sakura-chan, but I can't tell you yet. I promised I wouldn't."

She stared at him with a look of mild shock, before she looked down away from him and started to walk down the bridge. Yamato sighed and followed her.

"Okay Naruto," she mumbled.

"That was suave."

"Will you shut up Sai?"

"But teammates are supposed to talk to each other."

Naruto scowled and started to stomp away. He wanted to be teammates by insulting him, possibly ruining Hinata's plans, and upsetting Sakura? He was as bad as Sasuke for crying out loud! He froze as the memories of his best friend invaded his thoughts. Sasuke had been nearly unbearable to deal with. He was rude, arrogant, uncaring… and had become a brother to him. It had taken forever because of both of their stubbornness. The result had been far to little time for their friendship to grow. It wasn't a mistake he wanted to make again. Begrudgingly, he sighed and turned back.

"If you want to be teammates, then start with trying to be understanding of others feelings."

"I do not have feelings myself, so how am I to understand it in others?"

Naruto smiled sadly. If Sai answered to that bastard Danzo, there was no wonder why he was so messed up.

"Then I guess all I can say is watch and try to figure it out. It's not exactly something you can be told how to do. Just trust your gut."

"You really suck at giving advice."

"Screw you!"

"I thought you liked women Naruto."

"Damn it!"

Shikamaru frowned as he stared at the Hyuga heiress as she looked at him expectantly. Why were women always so blasted troublesome? He had just wanted to meet, organize the troublesome chunin exam, and then go watch the clouds. Was that too much to ask? Apparently someone thought so, because she had appeared and asked if she could talk with him… after swearing him to secrecy.

"So you want me to agree to help you come up with a plan, before you actually reveal what your goal is?"

"Yes."

"Which means it is illegal, or at least will result in an extreme backlash."

"Most likely."

"Troublesome."

"I am sorry, but Kurenai-Sensei has told my team that Asuma-Sensei likes to brag about your genius."

"Great."

"Please Shikamaru."

He scratched the back of his head roughly and looked up at the clouds. For her to come to him, when she really didn't talk to anyone, but her team, meant that it was really important… and he would surmise incredibly risky. If that was the case, he should help her, but that would be a lot of extra work. His mom would also be pissed if he got caught up in something that would no doubt be messy. He really shouldn't do it. He glanced down at her, but that left them out in the cold and he would be abandoning a fellow leaf-nin.

"Fine I'll help. What do you have in mind?"

"I am going to become the heiress of my clan and then use my authority to challenge my father for the title of head."

"Sounds pretty straightforward. Why do you need my help?"

"The Elder of the clan, the former clan head and my father's father will use any means to secure my younger sister, Hanabi, as the new heir."

"Why?"

"She has been groomed by him to yield to his views."

"Yield?"

"Hanabi appears cold, but deep down she is a young girl with an unbearable weight on her shoulders and changed to the whims of a tyrant."

"What do you expect he will do?"

"He will use my desire to protect the branch family against me. If he thinks I could possibly win, he will activate the Caged Bird Seal."

"This is really going to be a pain."

The sun was high in the sky as Team Kakashi knelt silently in the bushes surrounding the Tenchi Bridge. They had arrived early in the morning when it was still dark. They had no idea what time the person was to show, and unfortunately, Naruto had been so preoccupied trying to not get blown up that he never learned anything about Sasori and his mannerisms. It rendered Yamato's original plan to impersonate him impossible. The best option they had now was capture and interrogation. It was far from the best method, but offered the best chance of success.

Naruto himself was miserable. Yamato scared the crap out of him. He still swore he wasn't going to peek on the women's side. Sai was irritating, although he was beginning to suspect it was not intentional. The mysterious boy genuinely had no clue of how to deal with people. Sakura had just ignored or avoided him. He would have to explain things to her after the mission. Although if they did get Sasuke back… he shook his head. He was getting ahead of himself.

A figure walked calmly across the bridge as a cloak hid them from view. A small breeze kicked up and pushed the hood back just a fraction of an inch. Naruto's eyes narrowed and he repressed a snarl as his eyes caught a glimpse of silver hair and wire frame glasses. He'd recognize that description anywhere. It was the snake's pet Kabuto. He glanced over at Yamato as his instincts told him to charge in. However, he did learn his lessons and charging in would be foolish… unless he was told to charge in. Yamato nodded and Naruto grinned. He blasted out of the brush and landed in front of the target as the other three circled around him to prevent any escape.

The medic-nin's eyes narrowed for a minute before a cruel smirk stretched across his features.

"Hello Naruto-kun. This is quite the surprise. I see you have grown up some. If you are here then does that mean Sasori is dead?" Kabuto pulled down his hood. "It must have been excruciating for someone of your nature to sit and wait for me. We all know how much you love to charge in. Tell me, are you as hot headed as before?"

Naruto went to retort when a massive wave of killing intent washed over the bridge. The others quickly hopped back to his side and faced it. His heart beat picked up as Orochimaru slowly sauntered out from the forest. His cruel and nearly insane grin grew wider as he looked at each member of Team Kakashi.

"Well, well Naruto-kun, you almost look like a real ninja. Tell me, how much stronger have you gotten? I would very much like to see how

you handle Sasuke-kun. He has become much stronger than before," Orochimaru chuckled.

Naruto paused for a moment. Yamato was team leader, but he had the bastard's interest. He pasted a cocky grin on his face and took a step forward.

"Naruto wait." Yamato whispered harshly.

Naruto ignored him and took another step. He could practically feel Yamato's frown burn its way into his back. What could he say? Despite being a little more focused and aware, he still preferred the direct approach. He'd apologize later. He placed all of his attention back on Orochimaru.

"Why don't you call him over here and we'll find out?"

"As eager as I am to see the two of you face off, I don't want to risk you capturing my future body."

Naruto fought to keep his temper down. The snake talked like Sasuke was his property and it enraged him to no end. He wanted to knock that smug grin off that fake pale face. However, he was smart enough to know Orochimaru was in a completely different league than even the other Akatsuki. The snake may lack the power of some of its members, but he was far craftier. Naruto knew he needed to play it smart. It was obvious he couldn't beat Orochimaru… but that didn't mean he wouldn't try. He took a deep breath. If he was going to do what he was planning, then he needed to stay calm. Otherwise… that wouldn't work.

"He's not going to end up as your body. We're taking him home."

"But what if he does not wish to return to that weakling village? And what of the village itself, do you really think everything will go back to the way it was? Are you truly so foolish as to think that they will accept him back with open arms… and treat you as some sort of hero for bringing a traitor back?"

Naruto crouched down as his whisker marks darkened and his eyes turned into vertical slits. His mouth contorted up into a feral grin as chakra started to well up in his body. He was happy that it was coming easily this time. It was usually a struggle to find the balance, but apparently the fox didn't feel like playing around either. Now, how far should he push it?

"Sasuke needs some sense beat into him and I'm going to do it! I promised I'd bring him home so that's what I'm going to do, because that's my ninja way!"

The wind whipped around him furiously as a purple veil of pure chakra surrounded him. The first tail that sprouted had Orochimaru grinning like a kid in a candy store. The second tail caused Kabuto to leap forward to attack. Naruto used one of his tails to effortlessly knock him away. The med-nin's body created a trench thirty feet long. The third tail caused Orochimaru's smile to falter slightly and his teammates to stumble back.

"Impressive Naruto-kun, but are you capable of using such power?"

"Guess we'll find out you slithering pedophile!"

Naruto blasted forward taking out a huge portion of the bridge. He launched a chakra claw at the missing-nin who jumped back and weaved through the trees. The arm chased him without harming a single leaf. Naruto used the entire fox cloak as a chakra shell and performed a Shunshin. It snapped him forward so fast he almost became disoriented as he appeared right above Orochimaru and dove. The missing-nin snapped his head up and opened his mouth wide. Thousands of snakes sprouted forth, each with their own poisonous blade.

Naruto sucked in as much air as he could and roared. The force of the chakra expelled halted many of the snakes. Unfortunately, several pierced the shield and embedded themselves in Naruto before sending him crashing down into the ground. He was pushed down into the Earth as dust and stone were tossed up into the air.

He grunted in pain from the many stab wounds that decorated his body. The cuts hissed and sealed themselves as he stood up wobbly. He snarled and pulled out a kunai. He could smell his opponent through the dust cloud. He flung the blade in that direction and tore through eight hand signs.

"Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."

He leapt up out of the dust and watched as the hail of kunai showered Orochimaru and the surrounding landscape. A Yoko Rasengan formed in his hand as the Sannin melted into the ground. He cursed at the missed chance and fell to the ground softly. His eyes darted around. This wasn't good. He dove to the right as two massive snakes erupted from the ground and tried to devour him. He flipped onto his feet and lunged forward. The purple Rasengan slammed into the first snake. It ripped through it and went into the second one. He grinned. It was a two for one shot. The snakes collapsed to the ground dead as he went to turn.

An unbearable pain rippled though his spine.

He looked down shakily as the blade was torn cruelly out of his body. Time seemed to slow for him as he collapsed to the ground. His eyes widened in panic as he stared at his lower torso. He couldn't feel his legs! Barely half of his body was still connected. He tried to force the purple chakra to heal it, but he was in too much pain. It was mind numbing and so far beyond anything he had ever experienced. Even Sasuke's Chidori to the heart paled in comparison.

Orochimaru emerged from the ground slowly. The tip of his sword disappearing into his mouth. The pale man smiled savagely and walked into Naruto's line of sight. The purple chakra was flickering around the blonde, who could only pant heavily and clutch futilely at his wound. Naruto looked up at Orochimaru. A mixture of fear and hate burned in his eyes.

"Naruto-kun haven't you learned not to forget about you opponents?"

Naruto tried to mumble some kind of insult, but the words wouldn't form on his lips. He couldn't focus and the world rapidly slipped away. The pain was quickly lessoning as his mind faded into the numbing darkness. He failed? The darkness had consumed him entirely and he just seemed to float within it. He failed? The years of harsh training and struggling to overcome his short comings hadn't been enough? He tried to force himself to move. He couldn't just accept it. Death or failure were not options. He had promises to fulfill and dreams to realize and no one was going to prevent that! By sheer stroke of will he managed to crawl to his knees. In the darkness, he looked up and opened his mouth.

"Kyubi!"

Two shimmering malevolent eyes appeared and the black was engulfed in red.

The battlefield was seemingly ensnared in ferocious red chakra. It smothered the air and tainted the sunlight as it wrapped around the still form of Naruto. It poured into his gaping wound and healed it almost instantaneously. The blonde was up on all fours almost faster than the eye could follow. Three red tails of bubbling vicious chakra swayed behind him. His eyes glowed red and he snarled hatefully at the one who had caused him harm.

Orochimaru's eyes gleamed in his crazed excitement as he stared at the feral boy before him. He opened his mouth and his sword slowly emerged from his throat. The red light made the polished blade appear to be stained red. Orochimaru quickly realized that it was a poor move.

Naruto had realized that during his training that the more tails he gained the more animalistic he became. So currently, his sole thought when seeing the Kusanagi was that it brought pain. What brought pain must be destroyed. The Jinchuriki sat back on his haunches and forced as much chakra as he could between his two palms. It started to darken as it became denser, until it was a black orb of death that hovered between his palms.

"Oh crap," Orochimaru mumbled dryly as Naruto thrust his hands forward. The snake-nin bit both his thumbs and slammed his palms into the ground. "Kuchiyose: Sanju Rashomon!"

Three massive gates shot up from the ground and blocked the evil ninja from the black beam that raced towards him. The first and second gates fell quickly to the blast. The third barely survived. Orochimaru spun around as a claw ripped him in half and a Yoko Rasengan was shoved into his face.

Naruto landed in the dirt and let out an enraged growl as the seemingly defeated Sannin pulled himself together and then a new healthy version of him crawled out from the old one's mouth. The snake-nin cackled and slowly begun to sink into the ground.

"A most interesting array of abilities Naruto-kun. You always do seem to impress me. As enjoyable as this is, I must bid you farewell for now though. But do not worry; we shall see each other again very soon."

Naruto howled angrily into the sky at the missed opportunity to kill his prey. No, he shouldn't howl. The Kyubi howled. He was Naruto. He was human. His eyes squeezed shut and slowly his body seemed to relax as the bubbling chakra receded into his body. They opened revealing tired blue eyes. He stumbled forward a few steps and fell forward with a small grin. He overdid it again. His eyes closed again and he drifted into unconsciousness as Sakura and Yamato landed beside him.

Hinata forced herself to stare unflinchingly into her cousins eyes as he stared down at her with a mix of confusion and sternness. He had become significantly less hostile towards her over the years since his defeat at Naruto's hands. She could even say at times he came across as friendly or protective, well as much as he was capable of such. He was still not one for any type of oddity, preferring to instead stick to serious and predictable things, something completely different from what she was asking of him right now.

"You want me to do what Hinata-sama?"

"I want you to come with me to meet Naruto-kun when he returns… and let him look at your seal."

He frowned at her and she fought back the urge to wince. He was still sensitive about the awful seal on his head, not that she could blame him.

"Why?"

"I cannot say."

"Hinata-sama, do you not trust me, or is it that you are plotting something?"

"If you don't know what I'm doing, they can't threaten you. They can't hurt you."

After a brief instant of surprise, his eyes softened somewhat, albeit too little for most to tell. She could though and it made her relax somewhat.

"As a branch member it is my duty to protect you, not the other way around.'

"You can't protect me from them."

"Hinata-sama of course I ca-."

"Not if they can activate your seal with a mere hand sign Neji-nisan."

His jaw dropped slightly in shock as realization washed over his face. If it had been any other time, she would have giggled at seeing her stoic cousin looking like a confused fish.

"You're plotting against the head of the main family?"

"No." She shook her head furiously. "Just the Elder and those that are a threat to our family. Naruto told me he has been taught about seals by Jiraiya-sama. He claims he is still a novice, but he should be able to discern what the properties of the seal are… and hopefully figure out a way to remove it before the time is up."

"What do you mean time is up?"

She took a deep shuttering breath and steeled herself. She couldn't break down like she did in front of Naruto. Her cousin had to see she was the leader the clan needed. In gaining his support, then she had all, but a select few of the branch. She noticed he had paled drastically. The possible use of the seal was his worse fear come to life.

"At the end of this month, I will fight Hanabi for the position of heir. Regardless of who wins, the Elder will make sure that his ideals are enforced and passed on. He has come to believe that the clan is weakening and must go back to the more stringent traditions of the past."

"You mean-."

"Yes, you would be killed almost immediately for knowledge of main house techniques and the remaining branch members would be beaten down into servitude and viewed as less than dirt."

She stared at him unwaveringly as the veins around his eyes slowly crept up and his killing intent steadily grew. It wasn't her he was mad at that she knew. His anger was directed at the injustice an old fool was bent on unleashing. She watched as he slowly knelt down before her and bowed his head.

"I will help you in whatever way I can Hinata-sama. I swear it on my life."

Naruto's heartbeat pounded in his ears like furious drums as he forced himself to breathe evenly. His muscles felt like lead and he wanted nothing more than to pass out, wake up, eat several hundred bowls of ramen, and then pass out again. But he couldn't yet, not with the ability to finally accomplish his promise. He slid around another corner in the dimly lit hallways of Orochimaru's underground lair. It had taken several thousand shadow clones and a couple confrontations with Sai, who seemed to finally understand what it meant to be human… well a little, to get to this point.

They had found Sasuke.

His clones and Sai had found him just a hundred feet up ahead. The only problem was that Sasuke had responded by trying to blow them up. The clones were gone and he knew Sai was trying to deal with his best friend on his own, which he assumed from all the tremors was not going well. He clenched his teeth and increased his speed as daylight at the end of the tunnel appeared. This was it.

He rushed out into the open air and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the sunlight. He didn't slow down and dove toward where he sensed Sai was. His eyes came into focus as he tackled the ink user and they tumbled into the rubble… just an instant before Sasuke Uchiha's electrified Kusanagi pierced the ground where Sai's head would have been. Naruto quickly checked over Sai. He seemed fine, but wouldn't move.

"Be careful Naruto, he is channeling his lighting around him and it paralyzes whoever it comes in contact with," Sai said with a pained smile. "You think you can handle him?"

Naruto grinned with a nod. He had already known from his clones that Sai had intended not to kill Sasuke. It made the Root member alright in his book. While aggravating, the mysterious boy could potentially become a good friend down the road… a long tedious road.

Naruto slowly stood and turned toward his old friend who looked at him with a bored expression. The wind gently kicked up dust between the two of them as the tension in the area spiked and seemed to crackle from the sheer intensity. A symphony of emotions danced in his gut as he looked at the man he had promised he would bring home. He wasn't a fool. This Sasuke wasn't someone to play around with, and while it hurt, Naruto didn't doubt the bastard would try to kill him. This situation needed to be handled delicately.

"So Sasuke." Naruto took a cautious step forward as his grin stretched wider. "I see being Orochimaru's cock puppet hasn't diminished your glowing personality."

Sasuke disappeared in an impressive display of speed and Naruto's eyes narrowed as he felt the Uchiha's presence behind him. This could get tricky. Luckily, his other two teammates finally showed up.

"You still talk to much Naruto."

Naruto flicked a kunai into his hand and spun as Sasuke disappeared again. He scowled. The bastard was almost as fast as Lee… almost. He heard the lighting crackle behind him and he launched himself high into the air. He summoned several Kage Bunshin and they grabbed his jacket and flung him off to the side. He cursed as Yamato and Sakura failed in trying to ambush Sasuke. He had hoped by keeping the Uchiha's attention they could have grabbed him. But it was immediately apparent that they were all heavily outclassed. He landed heavily in a crouch as Yamato's body was struck by the lightning current and Sasuke hopped to the top of the crater. The captain's body fell back into the rubble even as he tried to move.

Naruto glanced over at Sakura who seemed to be completely in shock at seeing Sasuke. He couldn't blame her. The Sasuke before them looked more like Orochimaru's son than their old friend. It was unbelievable how much three short years had morphed the boy in front of them.

He gripped a handful of dirt angrily as various plans swam through his head. He only had one really good alternative to a long drawn out battle and he hated it. He hated it so much he had to fight back tears. They would have to abandon the mission if everyone was going to live. With Orochimaru slithering around and Kabuto playing backup, he couldn't risk going all out on his friend and then be defenseless. It would leave Sakura on her own, and while he didn't doubt her abilities, three wounded and two powerful enemies were too much for anyone.

He shook his head and walked up next to Sakura as Sasuke stared down impassively at them from the top of the crater. She went to move forward and he gently rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Easy Sakura-chan, we're not really in any position to take him on."

"Naruto?" She questioned as her emerald eyes looked at him in confusion, but it quickly melted into concern. "You're not planning on using that thing you did earlier are you?"

"That depends on him." He looked up at Sasuke. "What do you say Sasuke? Want to show off all our moves and go all out. I bet I'd win this time. Or maybe we should just leave and fight later?"

The air twisted harshly as Sasuke's Sharingan spun to life and barred down on them in barely restrained fury. Naruto frowned as the Kyubi seemed to shift around in the back of his mind uneasily… the Kyubi was never uneasy.

"Know your place orphan, I am an Uchiha. I will decide if you leave or not, and I will decide how we fight. Do not be so arrogant as to think that we are on the same level after so many years."

"Calling me arrogant after a speech like that is pretty hypocritical."

"Big words for a dead last."

"Sorry, I couldn't hear you with Orochimaru in your mouth."

The killing intent that spiked was stifling and Naruto noticed Sakura struggling to stay standing. He took some comfort in knowing that he could still piss the Uchiha off. It meant that the old Sasuke was buried in there somewhere. However, he knew that he couldn't retrieve Sasuke now and it hurt with him finally being so close, even if by some miracle they could all safely get back to the village. Unless he could decisively defeat his friend and prove that there was strength in Konoha, Sasuke would just try to leave again.

Sasuke brought his hands up and started to form hand seals. His Sharingan glaring at them with enough fury Naruto thought he might actually catch on fire. The jinchuriki slid back into a fighting stance and started to form a Rasengan. His eyes narrowed as Orochimaru appeared next to Sasuke and grabbed his hands.

"What are you doing Orochimaru?" Sasuke asked with a restrained annoyance in his voice.

"They have already killed two of the Akatsuki. We should let them live to see if they can eliminate more. Besides, isn't that move reserved for a special someone?"

Naruto's eyes darted back and forth between the two as a small nervous bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. Sasuke merely grunted and jumped away without a word. Orochimaru grinned wickedly at Naruto before turning and leaving as well. Sakura looked down at the ground sadly as he relaxed slightly. She looked up at him was a sad smile.

"Wow Naruto, you have gotten a lot smarter." She brushed away a tear that snuck out the side of her eyes. "I didn't think he'd have gotten so much stronger than us. We'll just have to try again later right?"

"I'm sorry Sakura-chan, but we'll get him someday right?"

"Yeah."

"If you two don't mind, I could use some help," Yamato called out from where he was sprawled out.

"But captain this is a valuable time for Naruto-kun, from what I read this is where he should attempt to kiss the girl."

"Will you shut up Sai!"

Kakashi zipped from one rooftop to the next as he fought to keep his normal lazy expression plastered to his face. However, inside he was angrier than he had been in a long time. He had just left Tsunade's office after being denied a leave of absence for him and Naruto. His plan had been to begin training Naruto in element manipulation and getting to see how much his hyperactive student had grown. That had been something he had wanted to do for years, but after the Suna mission, his curiosity and interest had soared to new heights. He had not been able to see Naruto fight, but to be able to nearly take out not one, but two high class ninja, was unbelievable. He had wanted to question the blonde privately after the mission, but unfortunately he had been immediately sent back out into the field.

He had returned quickly and decided to make sure he had some time to catch up. His first stop had been Tsunade's… something he was regretting significantly. He had been annoyed when he was told they had left after Orochimaru before his return. It was grating to learn they were possibly going to be able to retrieve Sasuke. However, what infuriated him was what his Hokage had told him when he demanded to know why she wouldn't give him time off. Her response was simple and a total slap in the face. Naruto had already learned of his element and had a solid grasp of its basics.

That was supposed to be his responsibility. Jiraiya had agreed to protect Naruto and turn him into a competent ninja and then give him back to his original sensei. Kakashi had spent years waiting for the ability to train his blonde student. He had meticulously planned it all out. How things would be taught and when they would be taught. And the toad sage had ruined it all.

He landed outside the women's baths silently and walked over towards the sound of someone giggling. He rounded the corner and all but marched up to the Sannin. Jiraiya never looked up, but stopped his giggling as soon as the silver haired nin stood behind him.

"I was wondering when we were going to have this conversation Kakashi. Follow me."

They disappeared in a swirl of dust and darted through the trees until they were far from the village. Jiraiya landed softly in a small clearing as he turned to stare seriously at the jounin. Kakashi's lone eye glared sternly at the taller man. Gone was the lazy looks and perverted mannerisms, instead the air felt as if a battle was about to begin.

"Why did you teach Naruto about the elements? We agreed that was going to be left up to me," Kakashi said.

"The gaki burned through what I had to teach him. I wasn't going to waste time not teaching him just because of your little plan. Elemental training was the next logical step, since the sage and advanced sealing arts are still a little bit ahead of him."

"There were plenty of other things you could have taught him. Worse case scenario would have you just making him practice with what he already knew."

Jiraiya's eyes narrowed and Kakashi almost took a step back by the sage's quick change in demeanor. He knew personally that Jiraiya was rarely serious, but even rarer did the man become genuinely angry. It was not something to be taken lightly.

"So I was supposed to limit his growth for your plans Hatake?"

"Being forced to grow too quickly can be just as dangerous."

"This coming from the man who taught the Uchiha traitor his prized jutsu and anything else the little prick demanded."

"I thought that by pushing Sasuke it would help keep him loyal to Konoha. It was a mistake on my part. Is that what this was about? You undermined what I asked of you for one mistake?"

Jiraiya's chakra spiked to the point it flattened the grass around him.

"One mistake? You taught Naruto how to walk up a damn tree and hold hands with his teammates! I had to spend over a year trying to fix things that should have been fixed in the first month as an active genin. The fact that he would even call you a sensei just goes to show how forgiving and kind he is. Tell me Kakashi, do you even know how hurt and abandoned he felt when you ran off with the Uchiha during the chunin exams?"

"Naruto understood that Sasuke needed me because of my Sharingan."

"No! You thought he did and didn't care enough to make sure. And to add insult to injury, you hand him off to Ebisu, perhaps one of the weakest jonin in the village."

Kakashi grit his teeth behind his mask. He couldn't argue against the accusations. Heck, he himself had entertained similar thoughts. However, the training he was supposed to provide was going to make up for all of it. It was supposed to allow him to atone.

"Maybe you're right, but as Sensei's student I should have been given another chance to make up for it. I should have handled the majority of his training not you!"

"But see that's part of the problem, you just want to train him because he was Minato's son, not because of Naruto himself."

"Like you are any different."

"I didn't know who he was until I found out he had the Kyubi, which wasn't until after I agreed to teach him. I decided to train some little blonde brat because he had guts… pure brainless guts. When I train him, I see Naruto the hyperactive, dense, unbelievably creative student. I see Minato's son as a distant second. All his life, he's had people see him as someone besides himself. The Kyubi, its container, the loudmouth blonde, the dead last, the Uchiha's teammate, and finally Minato's son are the only things people saw him as, never Naruto Uzumaki. You don't have any right to question me about what I taught my student."

Kakashi's shoulders slumped as Jiraiya's words hammered themselves into his mind. He struggled to believe what the sannin said, but as an elite jounin he could rationally accept the points Jiraiya made. It was a curse how quickly his mind worked because it was painfully quick in summarizing one simple conclusion. He had failed… and Naruto did not need him anymore. It was a bitter revelation.

"If you want to do something for Naruto, help him when he asks you to. Support him for who he is and let him find his own path. If you can't do that, then stay the hell out of his way."

Kakashi nodded silently as he looked down at the ground and Jiraiya walked away back towards the village. It really was bitter indeed.

Naruto's bottom lip stuck out in an annoyed pout as he clasped his hands behind his head and walked throughout Konoha's streets. He had kept it to himself, but the mission's failure had really bothered him. He wasn't sure if it was because they didn't get Sasuke, or because his friend was so chillingly different. Naruto's faith was unshakeable normally, but his years with Jiraiya had taught him how to read people better. What he read of Sasuke was not something he liked, and it left an impossibly small bit of doubt nibbling in the back of his mind.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck and he twisted around just in time to catch a pale hand lunging straight at him. It quickly caught his full attention. The skin was immaculate, but seemed strong like that of a fighter. He was so immersed in his scrutiny of the hand and how it fit into his that he barely noticed a slightly blushing Hinata staring at him. His eyes caught hers and he jumped back quickly and scratched the back of his head nervously.

"Jeez Hinata, we really need to stop meeting up like this. We're bound to kill one another eventually," he laughed nervously. Why the hell was he acting so nervous? It was only Hinata's hand. It must be nerves from her sudden attack. Yeah that made sense.

She stood up and smiled slightly as her blush disappeared.

"But it's fun to see you on your toes Naruto-kun."

"Glad to see I amuse you."

She just nodded happily and slapped something on his chest before she leapt up onto the rooftops and ran away. He frowned in confusion as his eyes drifted down to a piece of indigo paper stuck to his jacket. His demeanor instantly became more serious. So, it was tonight huh?

Was Jiraiya around? He could be a big help in figuring out Neji's seal. Naruto shook his head at that thought. His teacher was too important to Konoha and too close to Baa-chan. If what Hinata said was true, then they would be in a major political hotbed. One that could possibly ruin the Hokage's authority. The type of thing the old fart Danzo would jump at. He scratched his head furiously as the implications ran through his head. He hated politics and just barely understood them enough to know they were a pain in the ass and something to avoid. What he understood better was that if they failed, all of them would most likely be charged with treason and killed.

"Hey Naruto!"

He was immediately yanked from his thoughts by the voice. He looked up to see Sakura run up to him.

"Sakura-chan what's wrong?"

She stopped in front of him and smiled.

"Oh nothing, I just thought maybe you'd want to go get ramen for lunch and maybe talk about the mission."

Naruto smiled even as he felt apprehension fill up in his chest. The mission was the one thing he didn't want to talk about with Sakura.

"Sure Sakura-chan."

They wandered over to Ichiraku's in silence. It was agonizing for Naruto because for the life of him he couldn't figure out what to talk about. A problem they never had before he left. What could they talk about? The long travel between missions covered all of the catching up, and they had never really had any form of serious or deep conversations before. As the ramen stand came into view, he didn't think he could have been happier. They sat down and ordered quickly. The food was out almost immediately and Teuchi wandered off into the back… leaving the two of them alone.

"You know, Sasuke-kun's not the only one who's grown so much Naruto," Sakura said as she blew on the steaming broth. "I'm really not sure who would win between you two now."

He blinked at her in surprise before stuffing his mouth full of noodles.

"I mean the past two missions you've really taken charge and kind of led them. The plans were still crazy, but kind of made sense all at the same time."

"Thanks Sakura-chan, but I'm still a long ways from being able to lead effectively. I know where I need to be and what to do, but I have

no idea how to handle other people. If anything, my teamwork has really been setback."

"I really don't think so Naruto. You worked great with Kakashi-sensei and Yamato." She stirred the noodles and broth. "I've thought about it a lot lately and part of me has begun to feel that you've kind of outgrown Team seven."

He turned toward her in alarm. Her face, that was cheerful moments before, had quickly soured. Her emerald eyes plainly accused him of abandoning her and their team.

"That's not true Sakura-chan! Team seven is my family. I wouldn't turn my back on you guys."

"Then why won't you tell me about your new abilities, or include me in your plans? I'm not the same helpless little girl from before!"

"I don't include you in front line plans because you are the medic. If you had gotten hurt by Sasuke or Orochimaru I would have had to carry you, Sai, and Yamato home. You are too valuable to risk in a fight. I don't doubt your abilities, but it is still risky regardless. As far as my abilities, Ero-sensei made me promise to only reveal it as necessary. I'm sure Baa-chan did the same with you right?"

She clenched her fists and fought back tears.

"I know and I'm sorry for being like this. I just… I just can't help, but want things to be like they were. You, Sasuke-kun, Kakashi-sensei, and me working together as a unit with no secrets between us. I feel like I'm losing that dream with each passing day."

"It will go back. I'll make sure of it. I promised to get Sasuke back and I will."

"Then why didn't you at our last mission? We could have found a way if we had worked together."

"We were outmatched Sakura-chan. And as far as Sasuke, Ero-sensei always told me to look at the consequences. Bringing Sasuke back is one of the most important things to me, but not if it means he'll just end up in prison or leave again. And definitely not if it means I have to sacrifice someone else or go against my teacher's instructions."

She stood up abruptly and stared down at him as tears dripped down her cheeks. He knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear, but he wasn't willing to lie to her. She didn't deserve that.

"That's great Naruto, I'm glad you're so devoted to your new teacher. It's clear that he means more to you than your team!"

She whirled around and stomped off into the crowd. He wasn't sure whether to be confused, hurt, or heart wrenchingly sad. Why couldn't she understand where he was coming from? He wanted to fix things and reunite his family to the point he was almost desperate, but he had other responsibilities to consider. Jiraiya had put everything he had into him so that he could stop Akatsuki and protect this village. He couldn't just turn his back on what the pervert had asked of him, especially when it didn't conflict with his original promise.

He shook his head and tossed some money down on the counter before he shoved his hands in his pockets and walked out. The two neglected ramen bowls becoming cold.

Author's Notes:

Sorry, this is about 18 hours late. I ended up having to work until 6am and didn't get through the final edit before hand. Anyway, please read and review. I happily accept critiques as long as they will help me improve.

I do ask that you always give me a few chapters to explain out some points, so please keep the torches down on the Sakura/Kakashi/Sasuke topics for now.

As always, thank you for reading and if you would like to see my original work check out the main site in the profile.

See you next week.

Rising

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 4:

"So tell me Jiraiya, how proficient has Naruto become with using seals?" Tsunade asked as she poured herself a cup of sake.

"As with everything, he does it his own way." He snatched the bottle away from her and poured himself a small cup.

"Care to explain?"

"He has a solid grasp of basics and the theory behind them. The rest he just… well he wings it."

She sputtered into her cup and slammed it down on the table.

"What do you mean he wings it? Seals are an extremely complicate art that only a few can use proficiently and even less can be considered masters of it."

"But this is Naruto we're talking about. He has a way of simplifying things and making them work."

"There has to be more to this."

"Not really, seals are partially about knowledge. What property each seal contains, how to read the chakra flow, how they mix and build upon each other to create new seals, these things are only a small part of sealing. A bigger part is creativity, which Naruto has bucket loads of… although it is a little crude."

"So because he has a good imagination he can create seals, please."

"Not quite as simple as that, but you have the idea. Naruto does it very simplistically and in a step by step method. Where as I would make one seal that would do everything with a flare of chakra, he uses multiple techniques to get the job done. It is very logical in an out of the box sort of way."

She frowned and took another sip.

"I spent years researching and crafting my seal Jiraiya. It is not easy."

"But you have one seal that does a hundred things. He does a hundred things for one seal. It's not the most graceful, but it ends up working. You should see him unseal things. It's crazy how he does it, but in some cases it works better than the way I do it."

"Unbelievable, that brat can't do anything normal can he?"

"Nope," he chuckled. "But hey look at Minato. He went farther than anyone else and it was all because of his creativity."

The stars twinkled playfully in the night sky as the full moon shone down, illuminating the training field where Naruto and Hinata had sparred previously. The blonde ninja sat next to the river and stared down at his reflection in silent contemplation. One thought continued to permeate his brain, even though it was unwanted. Sakura wasn't willing to listen to his side of things, because it meant the awful truth that things would never be the same. It didn't mean things wouldn't get better, but it would change. For someone like Sakura, change was often unwelcome if it didn't fit in perfectly with her personal views. He didn't blame her at all since he was of a similar mind frame.

He perked up as two presences landed softly behind him. He remained sitting even as he spun around. Neji and Hinata walked up to him without a word. Neji was radiating a nervous energy even though he was trying to hide it behind his stoic visage valiantly. They quickly sat down across from Naruto. Given the situation, it was silently agreed to go straight to work. The branch Hyuga removed his headband and laid it neatly in his lap. Naruto stuck his bottom lip out as he studied the symbols that adorned the Hyuga's forehead. It was a nasty one, and he could tell immediately it was designed to prevent any form of tampering. Jiraiya really would have been a huge help that was for sure.

"I can tell you already this thing is going to be a pain in the ass," Naruto mumbled as he leaned in closer.

"Is it even possible?" Neji asked calmly even as a small tone of hopefulness broke through.

"Oh it's possible, but from what I've read from the symbols there are two problems in dispelling it. The first is that it will literally destroy your brain. I'm confident I can get past that part, but the other problem is your eyes will rot out of your head. You'd be alive and free, but I assume having a bunch of blind Hyuga bumping into each other isn't what you want."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata mumbled embarrassedly as Neji's left eye twitched slightly.

"No Naruto, that is not what I would want," Neji said.

Naruto leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. He was favoring the idea of trying to trick the seal and he had a pretty good theory on how to do it. But theory was far different from practice. It was also risky because it required some degree of medical knowledge, which he lacked.

"We need a med-nin. A good one if what I'm thinking of is going to work."

"I am qualified Naruto-kun."

"Really Hinata? I saw you use it earlier, but wasn't sure how much you knew."

"Hinata-sama?"

"I'm not anywhere near as talented as Sakura-san, but Tsunade-sama assures me my skills are very good."

"Wow that's really cool Hinata!"

"Yes, it is most interesting," Neji said as he shot her a look that promised further questioning.

"What do you need me to do Naruto-kun?"

"Well it won't be pretty, but basically, I want to cut the chakra pathways of the seal. This would force the seal to assume the host was dead and deactivate."

"But wouldn't that lead to Neji-nisan's eyes being destroyed?"

"Yes, but the seal does so by sending a massive pulse of chakra. After the pulse, the chakra stored in the seal dissipates and the seal dissolves. If we send an opposing pulse of chakra to intercept the seal's pulse, then we should be able to save the eyes… or the front of your face will explode Neji."

"That would be undesirable," Neji said.

"Well it should work out. You want to try it?" Naruto asked with a grin.

The other two blinked in disbelief.

"Naruto-kun, don't you want to take more time to come up with a better solution?"

"We've got three weeks until we're out of time. If this works, it will take that long to unseal all the branch house members. Besides, for me to come up with something better is going to take another few years of studying and even then it will be along this same line. If it makes you feel better, my seals always work better than I plan."

"Didn't your exploding tags nearly kill you?" Hinata asked.

"Exactly, they did more than planned."

"Do it."

"Neji-nisan?"

"Naruto is right Hinata-sama. We do not have time to be hesitant, not when our family is at risk."

She nodded as Naruto pulled out a scroll and a brush. He quickly scribbled several designs into it and bit his thumb. He smeared a line of blood over it and pressed his left palm down. Chakra surged into the scroll as Naruto brought his other hand up in a one handed tiger seal. A pale silver smoke started to rise from the scroll as he pressed the tips of his fingers directly onto Neji's forehead. The smoke formed tendrils and shot forward before seemingly wrapping around the various parts of the caged bird seal.

"Okay Hinata, I need you to use your Byakugan and chakra scalpel to start severing the chakra strands that connect Neji's seal to his brain. Start with the weakest strands and then move on to the bigger ones. Leave five of them, because they will all have to be cut at once for this to work. Neji, every time she cuts one it's going to feel like the seal is activating. The scroll will also keep tugging on the seal so just bear with it okay."

Neji could only wince in reply as Hinata sliced the first stand. The Hyuga genius clenched his hands in the dirt as he fought back the urge to scream in pain. Hinata looked worried, but kept focused as she snapped one after another. The tendrils from Naruto's scroll

seemed to tug harder with every cut and quickly it looked as if the smoke was going to pull the seal right off Neji's forehead. The normally stoic boy had tears leaking out of his eyes as the situation continued to intensify.

"I have cut all but five.

"Okay." Naruto forced some of his chakra into his fingertips as the chakra in his palm flared violently. "Cut them now!"

Neji cried out in pain as Hinata severed the final strands and the scroll ripped the seal into itself. He collapsed to the ground panting heavily. His clothes hung to his damp skin and he shook uncontrollably. Hinata looked at Naruto pleadingly as he quietly rolled up the scroll. He gave the biggest grin he could and a thumbs up. She smiled happily as green chakra surrounded her hands. She held them over her cousin and a look of relief washed over her.

"So Neji, how do you feel?"

"That is… a foolish question," Neji said between ragged breaths. "However, it appears your plan was a success. I am alive and not blind."

"Unfortunately, we couldn't completely remove the stick up your-."

"That was Neji-nisan's way of saying thank you Naruto-kun."

They waited patiently as Neji recovered. Slowly his energy returned and once he could walk around easily he mumbled that there was someplace he had to be and left. Naruto lifted his head as he enjoyed a cool breeze that blew past him. He glanced over towards Hinata and his breath caught in his throat. The wind gently brushed her hair that seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. A small gentle smile graced her lips as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the breeze. He admitted as his mind started functioning again, that it was one of the most genuinely beautiful things he had ever seen.

He shook the thoughts from his head and walked over to her. They needed to plan their next step and he had several questions for her. Staring at her like an idiot wouldn't do either of those things.

"That worked actually about as well as I planned it. I must be getting better at this stuff."

"It was really impressive Naruto-kun."

"Thanks Hinata, so what's next in your game plan?"

"I think we need to release the rest of the branch members as you said earlier. Do you think it is possible for us to do ten a night? I should be able to sneak that many out of the compound without notice."

"If we need to do ten then we'll do ten. What about what you're going to do? I doubt the Elder and his lackeys will just take this lying down."

"The family members who cannot fight must be protected. I believe we must bring in more allies. I have two in mind that could be very helpful since I want to keep this circle small."

Naruto's face briefly scrunched up in thought. A flash of green spandex appeared in his mind and a smile crept up.

"Yeah, I know someone who would be good to have around."

"Alright then, we shall meet here tomorrow night at the same time. We need to be careful since they will be watching me the closer we get to the deadline."

"No problem, I'm sure you can take care of yourself. You've gotten really strong."

She gave him a small nod of thanks and started to walk away.

"Hey Hinata wait! How'd you learn all that medical stuff?"

She turned her head over her shoulder with a sly smile.

"I don't think that's something I should talk about just anywhere Naruto-kun. I think nothing less than dinner would be appropriate… a date as it were."

A blazing blush crept up onto his cheeks as soon as she turned away and walked into the forest. A date. A date? A date! She just suggested they should go on a date! That'd never happened to him before. Sure he'd asked Sakura, but he really had no clue as to what he was supposed to do on a date. What should he do? He needed advise. Yes, advice would be good. Where was Ero-sensei? Wait no, the pervert would just hand him one of his boring books. Where was Iruka-sensei? Yes, Iruka-sensei would help. Date.

He passed out onto his back as the surge of thoughts forced his mind to shut down. Had he been able to remain conscious and head back to the village, he would have spotted an unconscious heiress sporting an inhuman blush.

Sai knelt quietly amongst his fellow Root members as his master, Danzo, sat before them. The old man posed regally in the shadows, a king within his kingdom. However for all the posturing, Sai didn't doubt for a second that Danzo could kill them all with ease. The man may appear crippled, but it was a front more than anything else. An act of deception in order to keep that thing behind his bandages a secret.

"Do you have something you wish to ask Sai?" Danzo's aged voice asked pointedly.

Sai stiffened slightly. Even if the man's eyes were closed there was little doubt he knew every action his subordinate made.

"No Sir."

"Do not believe that just because I entertained your request to remain with the nine tails, that I am bestowing more freedoms upon you."

"My loyalty is still to you first my lord."

"See that it remains that way." Danzo stood up slowly as his back popped with every ascending inch. "I have a mission for all of you. There are three current threats to the village that surpass all others. The nine tailed fox, the Akatsuki, and Orochimaru and his companions. We are going to eliminate them all in one fell swoop."

"Do you wish for us to assassinate them Danzo-sama?" An agent to Sai's left asked.

"No, I cannot be implicated in this. We will set a trap, and they should kill each other. At the very least, it will diminish their collective threat."

"What do you order of us?"

"The Akatsuki wants the nine tails. The nine tails wants Sasuke Uchiha. The Uchiha is obsessed with his brother who is a part of the Akatsuki. I require that false information be passed along in order for them to chase down each other."

"But sir, many of the villagers have begun to view Naruto as a hero, and they still hope for Sasuke's return. Their deaths could result in a large backlash from Konoha's citizens." Sai felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck as Danzo opened his one good eye and stared down at him.

"Such a thing would only serve to discredits the slug princess's ability to be an effective Hokage and further my own advance to the position. At worst, it would merely damage Uzumaki's reputation and allow me to harness him as a more effective weapon. It is for that reason Sai that I wish for you to take this seal. During the battle, I want you to place this on Naruto. It will unleash the full force of the

nine tails power temporarily and drive the villagers to fear him once more."

The old man nodded and a Root member moved over to Sai and handed out a small paper seal. Sai took it and hid it in his vest. A strange foul taste seemed to form in his mouth, but for what reason he didn't know. It just felt… wrong.

Naruto slurped at his ramen happily as Iruka thumbed his wallet sadly. He wasn't entirely sure why his favorite blonde student had dragged him out of his house in the middle of the night, but he assumed it was fairly important. The blonde had been frantic and had babbled too much to understand, so Iruka had dragged him to the Ichiraku Ramen Stand in order to calm him down. It worked, but in the end, he had sacrificed his poor wallet.

"So Naruto, what exactly is so important you dragged me out at three in the morning, and prevented the ramen stand from closing."

Naruto froze in mid-slurp and Iruka was immediately concerned. Naruto never stopped in mid-slurp.

"I need to ask you about something."

"What?"

"What am I supposed to do on a date?"

Iruka almost fell out of his chair at the absurdity of the question. That was what was so blasted important? Even Teuchi seemed to be surprised as he listened in discreetly from where he was cleaning up.

"You dragged me out here for that?" Iruka's right eye twitched madly as the desire to kill his old student became nearly over powering.

"I'm sorry, I just… I was just asked out by someone and I really have no idea what to do or say. Its not like it's happened a lot you know!"

Iruka blinked and paused for a moment as Naruto stared up at him intently. The kid was really nervous about it. Iruka smiled slightly. It was nice to see a girl finally take an interest in him. Three in the morning wasn't that late anyway.

"Okay Naruto, I'll tell you what I know."

"Thanks Iruka-sensei you're the best!"

"I know absolutely nothing about dating."

"What?" Naruto jumped up and pointed an accusing finger. "Someone as old as you has never been on a date? Oh my God, you must have like thirty cats in your apartment or something!"

Iruka lunged and grabbed Naruto's jacket and shook him roughly as a vein throbbed on his head.

"I do not!"

"He's never had to go on a date brat because I prefer it nice and quiet at home."

Naruto and Iruka froze and turned slowly to the stands entrance. Naruto's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates as his jaw dropped.

"You- you're that crazy psycho lady from the chunin exams!"

Anko Mitarashi grinned wickedly as she strutted up to them. Iruka let go of Naruto and turned to her as Naruto fell back onto his stool in shock.

"Hey I remember you. You're that loud mouthed brat in the bright orange jumpsuit. You haven't gotten yourself killed yet huh?"

"Anko-chan, this is Naruto. I've told you about him before remember." He looked over at his dazed student. "Naruto, this is Anko Mitarashi… my girlfriend."

"What?" Naruto shouted. "Are you insane? Man Iruka-sensei, you may have been better off with the cats."

Anko laughed loudly as Iruka glared in annoyance at the blonde.

"I like him Iruka. He's got spunk!"

"That's one way of putting it," he mumbled. He shook his head. "I thought you were out on a mission?"

"I finished early and went to find you." She leaned in close to his ear and lowered her voice so only they could hear. "I've been so very lonely Iruka-kun."

Iruka blushed slightly before he turned toward Naruto in a hurry.

"Well it was nice seeing you Naruto good luck on your date!"

The academy teacher grabbed her hand and they vanished in a Shunshin. Naruto sat there with a perplexed look on his face before he realized they were gone.

"What the hell?"

Teuchi placed another bowl down in front of his best customer.

"Eat that and I'll tell you what you have to do for a date."

Naruto ate happily as Teuchi talked for well over an hour. While, Root members across the country darted through the shadows that night brought. Their only thoughts rested solely on the completion of their mission for their master. They were like a whisper that echoes softly from the dark, or the small voice that invaded the dreams of those who slept unaware. Danzo's nefarious web would be woven across the land as he commanded. All was for him, for he was all.

Five hidden figures landed simultaneously in the open field that Naruto and Hinata seemed to favor. Naruto's grin threatened to split

his face as he looked at each of the members. Hinata had good choices. Lee, Shikamaru, a guy he guessed was Shino, Hinata, and himself all stood in a circle staring at each other.

"Is that you Shino?" Naruto asked.

"Has it been so long that you are unsure of my identity Naruto?"

"Shino, you've got about two square inches of your face showing. Most people wouldn't be able to recognize you."

"Perhaps this is true. Perhaps it is not."

"I see Lee was your choice Naruto-kun." Hinata said.

"Yosh! Naruto-kun has informed me of this most wonderful endeavor." Lee gave a small bow. "I am honored to assist you."

"Yeah, he's about as loyal as you can get and having him in a fight could be really handy," Naruto said and looked around. "I'm surprised mutt boy isn't here."

"This isn't the type of mission Kiba-kun excels at. He's not very… discreet," Hinata said.

"But Naruto and Lee are?" Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. "Troublesome."

"I'm surprised that you're here Shikamaru. I figured with as lazy as you are it would be too troublesome," Naruto said.

"It is, but not as much as what will happen if the Hyuga Elder succeeds."

"Aren't you going to question if that is Shikamaru, Naruto?"

"Oh for crying out loud Shino!"

"Can we get to this troublesome plan? The less time we spend together the less chance there is we will get caught."

The jovial mood turned somber as everyone silently agreed with the shadow user. Hinata stepped forward and took a deep breath.

"Between now and my fight with my sister Hanabi we will unseal all of the branch family. I will then fight her and win. This will secure my position as heiress and give me the right… the right to challenge my father and the Elder for immediate leadership of the clan."

"Do you think that is wise Hinata-sama?" Neji asked as he landed behind the group. "Hiashi-sama is terrifyingly strong. I know from recent events that you are hiding a great deal of your abilities, but do you think it is enough?"

"Are you kidding? Hinata is wicked strong! She'll be able to beat the crap out of anyone she has too!" Naruto said. He frowned when he saw everyone staring at him with intrigued gazes.

"And just how do you know this Naruto? How much time have you been spending with Hinata-sama?" Naruto could have sworn the stoic Hyuga was trying to repress a smirk.

"We've sparred before. What's it to you?"

"Nothing for the time being, however Hinata-sama, even should you succeed in gaining the title as clan head, the blatant disregard for clan tradition and law would be considered treasonous at best."

"You didn't seem to mind when we did it with you." Naruto didn't like where Neji was heading with the discussion. Hinata didn't need anymore people working against her.

"I'm not ungrateful, far from it actually. If she chooses this path I will support her, but Hinata-sama you must realize that even if the branch family will love you for what you've done, the main will seek retribution."

Hinata shook her head slowly as a small smile graced her features.

"You are getting ahead of yourself Neji-nisan. I will worry about making sure our family is safe, and I will destroy the practices that will lead to our end. I will worry about the Elder and his followers when the time comes."

"You will not be alone in this. How do I know this? Because we are comrades and will standby you," Shino said as everyone nodded in agreement. "It appears Naruto especially will be there for you."

A faint blush seemed to creep up on the two mentioned. Naruto quickly hid it behind a scowl.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what I said."

"Hinata and I have come up with several plans in case her current one fails." Shikamaru walked to the center of the circle. "Naruto, you're job is guarding Hinata if something happens. Lee, Shino, you two are going to help me protect the branch members and take out anyone attacking them. We have to succeed one way or another. It's just too troublesome to be tried for treason."

The others nodded in agreement.

"One last thing Hinata-sama, you will need a personal team to bear witness to the events of the day. Hanabi and by extension Hiashi-sama will be backed by the Elder. I and the rest of the branch would fill this role for you, but…" He let the words trail off.

"I understand Neji-nisan. Naruto-kun, Shino-kun would you both be willing to stand in my corner?"

"Certainly."

"Of course!"

"It's settled then, in three weeks Shino and Naruto will escort Hinata to her fight. The rest of us will provide protection in the event that anyone comes under attack," Shikamaru summarized.

"Yes, thank you all of you," Hinata said with a bow.

"No problem, now where are the rest of these guys we have to unseal?"

Danzo's false message spread out like an infectious disease as it coursed from one person to the next. Rumors, gossip, and hushed conversations filled the underworld. The ears within the shadows quickly returned it to their various masters.

Konoha:

"Sasuke Uchiha is where?" Tsunade shouted as she stood up and slammed her hands on her desk.

Bunker in Rice Country:

"Lord Orochimaru! Sasuke has disappeared," Kabuto said as he blasted into his masters private chambers.

"Why?"

"There were murmurings of Itachi Uchiha being spotted within Fire Country. I believe Sasuke left to investigate."

"Foolish child putting himself at risk. He must be retrieved immediately. I will not lose my body after such a long wait. Let's go Kabuto."

Secret Cave:

"Itachi! We have just received information that Sasuke Uchiha is being sent on a mission to assassinate the nine tails. We believe

Orochimaru is attempting to stop our plans," Pain's holographic form said. "You and Kisame are to prevent this and retrieve the Kyubi."

"Understood."

Naruto's heart beat quickly as Tsunade stared at him. Sakura to his right seemed just as anxious. To his left stood Kakashi and Sai, the former hadn't pulled out his book and even the latter seemed anxious. Those two alone solidified what was happening firmly in reality. Sasuke was in Fire Country on some type of mission for Orochimaru. The mission itself was only slightly important. What really mattered is Sasuke was going to be alone, which meant they would have a much greater chance of grabbing him.

He clenched his fist as his excitement started to build up. He'd have to unload everything he had. Unless it was a clear victory in his favor, he wouldn't be able to reason with Sasuke.

"Naruto are you listening?" Tsunade asked with a slight edge to her voice.

"Yeah, I'm listening Baa-chan."

She looked at him calculatingly for a moment before looking away and talking again.

"From Sakura's report, I have come to believe that Sasuke has been using drugs to further enhance his abilities and has at least one technique that he is confident that it will assure him victory. He is not to be underestimated. Kakashi you're in charge. I want all of you to realize something." Her tone became much more grave, and Naruto felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. "Sasuke may not want to be saved. I hope for your sake that is not the case, but should it come to where Kakashi believes him to be a threat to you or Konoha… he is to be eliminated as a missing-nin."

Naruto fought the urge to wince as Sakura gasped and brought her hands to her mouth. He worried that was one order she wouldn't be able to follow. He himself was having a tough time wrapping his head around it. But Sakura, she still hadn't talked to him after their talk last time… that had been twelve days ago. He steeled his resolve. He loved Sasuke like a brother and would do everything in his power to save him. It wouldn't come to a choice between the village or his friend. It couldn't.

"You leave immediately, dismissed!"

The four bolted out of her open window and took out across the village rooftops. It was a half days run to get to where they were supposed to be. It didn't allow them any time to waste. He glanced to his right as Sakura ran up to him. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead of her.

"Can I trust you Naruto?" She asked.

He frowned. It hurt him greatly that she even had to ask a question like that. However to her, he must seem like a stranger. She was just trying to be reassured that his promise was still valid. He gave her the biggest smile he could.

"Of course you can Sakura-chan."

"Okay." She smiled back at him. "Then let's go get our teammate back!"

Team Kakashi quickly made their way through the dense forests of the Land of Fire. The air was saturated with humidity and even with the breeze from running and the shade from the trees, it was unbearably warm. It served only to increase the already tense atmosphere. Sai stayed to the back of the group and would every so often toss a glance at Naruto. He subconsciously patted his vest that had the terrible seal his master had given him. Danzo-sama's messengers had done well. They were close enough that when

Naruto released the majority of the Kyubi's power, the village would feel it. If by some miracle Naruto reverted back from his transformation, there was little doubt the village would revert completely back to the way they had been during Naruto's childhood.

The foul taste that had plagued Sai since he had been given the seal seemed to intensify. He had read about it. The bad taste in his mouth stemmed from a severe dislike of something. It confused him since he had never really liked or disliked anything. However, Naruto had become known as a friend in a startling short period of time. The blonde seemed to have a way that made you want to trust him, to be loyal to him. Sai didn't doubt if he was normal he would have tossed the seal in the trash. But then again, if he was normal he wouldn't have a cursed seal tattooed to his tongue.

Multiple explosions echoed throughout the forest as birds scattered to flee the monstrous battles taking place. Naruto landed in a heap and tore off the burning remains of his jacket. Well, this battle was off to a good start. His eyes narrowed as they rested on Sasuke. They had been caught by surprise. The giant blue bastard from the Akatsuki had come out of nowhere. Kakashi and Sakura were forced to engage him while Naruto and Sai went ahead to intercept Sasuke. Unfortunately, Sasuke had spotted them first. Apparently, the Uchiha was still a little upset about the jokes made about him and Orochimaru doing private things, because the only hello Naruto got was a massive flaming dragon engulfing him.

It was here that Naruto found himself shirtless, scorched, and slightly annoyed. Sai had disappeared and Sasuke looked like he was more than willing to kill Naruto… painfully. A pair of blood red Sharingan glared down at him. Naruto just smiled.

"I see Orochimaru let you off your leash for a little bit Sasuke. What's the matter? You not housebroken yet?"

"I really should not be wasting my time with you Naruto, but I desire to shut that infuriating mouth of yours permanently." Sasuke

unsheathed his blade and a current of lighting coursed down its steel edge.

"Bring it, you snake sucking bastard!"

Kakashi pulled his headband up hastily and his Sharingan spun to life. He had encountered this particular missing-nin before, and he knew the shark like man was not to be underestimated. Sakura tightened her gloves as she stood behind him. He was glad she had chosen to stay behind instead of rushing straight for Sasuke. It was silently agreed upon that Naruto would be the one to handle their teammate. They all knew the only chance Sasuke would agree to come back willingly would be if Naruto had surpassed him.

Sakura shot forward straight at Kisame much to the surprise of the swordsman. Her fist shot forward and he barely had time to dodge to the side. Her fist connected with the ground and large chunks of Earth fell away like a massive earthquake. He jumped up into the air and started to tear through hand signs.

"Suiton: Bakusui Shoha." He opened his mouth wide and hundreds of gallons of water rushed out.

Sakura pushed as much chakra to her feet as she could. She brought her arms up in front of her defensively as the massive wave rushed over her violently. She fought to push her chakra deeper into the ground to keep her foothold as the force of the water tried to wash her away. Kisame grinned a toothy sadistic grin and slammed his palm onto the waters rushing surface.

"Suiton: Goshokuzame!" Five sharks composed of water bled from his finger tips. The finned creatures circled once and then raced along with the current toward the blind kuonichi.

"Suiton: Daibakufu no Jutsu!" Kakashi called out from his place on top of the water.

The water swirled into a massive water column that shielded Sakura from the sharks. Kisame's grin faded as his sharks were swallowed up by the vortex and dispelled. He looked over at Kakashi with an annoyed expression.

"My sharks were hungry." He sighed and glanced down at Sakura briefly. "But it's not like that boney little girl was going to provide much meat."

He pulled the giant bandaged sword from his back and held it in front of him. His bloodthirsty grin returned full force.

"You might make a better meal though!"

The two rushed towards each other on the water's surface. Kakashi dodged to the side as Kisame swung Samehada down. The power of his strike nearly cleaved the man made lake in two. The shark-nin spun and Kakashi flipped back and charged his hand with lightning chakra. He waved his hand forward and the electricity formed into a ferocious dog that pounced forward. It dove under the surface of the water as Kakashi leapt into the air.

The lake became a pool of lightning.

Kisame yelled out as arks of electricity coursed through and around him. He collapsed to his knees and kept a shaky grip on his sword as he panted heavily. Kakashi landed and gripped his wrist. Chakra sparked to life in his palm and almost instantly his prized Raikiri surged to life.

"You're a real piece of work you know that," Kisame said as he struggled up onto his feet. "You've fried your own subordinate. I thought you Konoha goody goodies looked down on that kind of thing."

"We do," Sakura said from behind him.

Kisame looked behind his shoulder and her fist collided with the side of his face. He was sent sailing across the water as bits of tooth and blood flew out of his mouth.

He sunk bellow the surface seemingly unconscious as Kakashi released his attack and walked over to Sakura.

"I was hoping you'd figure out how to escape," he said as his normal eye seemed to smile.

A vein appeared on her forehead as she clenched her fist.

"You mean you charged the water without being sure?"

"Ma, ma, I figured you'd realize I left the vortex hollow and swim into it."

Their eyes grew wide as three chakras flared up terrifyingly high. Sasuke's was over where Naruto had headed and now the forest was on fire. The other two were in the opposite direction and Kakashi recognized them immediately. Itachi and Orochimaru had run into each other and apparently weren't very happy about it.

"Sakura we need to-." His voice died in his throat as an enormous outpouring of malevolent chakra saturated everything. He had felt that once before and it didn't help to make it any less nightmarish. There was only one thing that could produce chakra like that… the Kyubi.

Itachi sat in the tree with his eyes closed as he stretched his senses out across the battlefields. He had known Sasuke was near long before he had attacked Naruto. While he was pleased with his brother's growth, the disgusting darkness of his chakra disheartened him. That kind of evil was only surpassed by Madara. It was something he had prayed would not happen. He had hoped that even though Sasuke would hate him, his younger brother would not

surrender himself to the cursed nature of the Uchiha bloodline. It appeared that Sasuke didn't merely surrender… he reveled in it.

He didn't react when the rapid slithering of a serpent reached his ears. So, his brother's master decided to follow as well? It was a welcome surprise. Orochimaru had been a problem for far too long. Itachi had spent years feeling guilty for not killing him when he had the chance. It would have saved the Sandaime's life and the village a great deal of strife. It was a strong possibility it may have also saved his younger brother.

He kept calm as a snake wrapped around him and sunk its fangs deep into his throat. It shook its head roughly as it tried to sever his neck. His body burst into a dozen crows that quickly flew away from the snake and reformed on another branch.

"Ku ku ku, most impressive as always Itachi-kun. I'm surprised that you are actually here. It appears the information we retrieved was correct after all," Orochimaru said as he appeared from the tree Itachi had been sitting on.

Itachi's neutral expression never faltered, but inside his mind he was calculating what he had just heard. If there was information about him being here that would explain Sasuke and Orochimaru's presence. They shouldn't know he was here if they were only planning on assassinating Naruto. Unless, this entire scenario was a trap… Danzo. Anger flickered slightly within his obsidian eyes. The old war hawk never was one for threats. It would appear that the old fool needed to be reminded that Itachi Uchiha was not to be ignored. However, he would need to skin a snake first.

"Katon: Hosenka no Jutsu."

Itachi took a deep breath and blew over thirty fireballs at the snake-nin. Orochimaru leapt straight into them and grit his teeth in pain as his pale skin was blackened from the burns. A pair of hands appeared in his mouth and pulled another healthy body out. The

reborn body opened its mouth and hundreds of snakes, each with its own sword, rushed out towards the ever calm Uchiha.

Itachi's eyes morphed into his Mangekyo Sharingan. Bloody tears fell from his eyes as black flames erupted from his right eye and buried Orochimaru, snakes and all. The pale man screamed in agony as the unquenchable Amaterasu ate away at his body. Another unburned body attempted to flee from the mouth of the destroyed one. It failed. Each new body was ignited as it struggled to free itself from the old. He writhed in agony, but focused one furious eye on the man who would end his life.

"Orochimaru, you will not escape this time," Itachi said monotonously. "Not even your ashes will survive the flames of my Sharingan."

The snake-nin gave one last angry cry before the black flames consumed him entirely. Itachi rubbed his eyes as the returned to normal and frowned. That was careless of Orochimaru and it didn't sit well with him. He glanced with blurry vision to his right as Kisame and his clone walked out from behind the tree. The clone held the decapitated head of Kabuto Yakushi.

"I've got to remember Samehada doesn't cut off heads well. The silver haired brat did a lot of squirming and screaming. It was a pain in the ass," Kisame said as his sword rested on his shoulder. "So you finally did Orochimaru in huh? His ring on him?"

"No. You chose not to finish your fight?"

"Yeah. I got knocked out by the little pink haired bitch for a minute. They were lucky Orochimaru showed up. I decided to leave them to make sure everything was okay here."

"Everything is fine-." Itachi's words were cut short as the Kyubi's poured out over the atmosphere. "Perhaps not."

Authors Notes:

Well I finally managed to get a chapter in before I had to go work. I'm excited because I've finally gotten to the point in the story where it isn't quite so enslaved to the manga cannon. I hope that you enjoyed the chapter.

Feel free to let me know what you think. Either by review or checking out the WSE Forums.

And as always, thank you for reading and if you would like to see my original work check out the main site in the profile.

See you next week.

Washing Away

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 5:

In battle, it was taught that a ninja must always prepare for the unexpected. For Naruto, he had a knack for reacting to the unexpected, but he was never actually prepared. Nine times out of ten, it worked out well. However, there was always the rare occasion that something happened so unexpected and awful that he couldn't recover from it. This was one of those times.

He had been prepared to leap at Sasuke when Sai had appeared out of nowhere and slapped some strange piece of paper over his stomach seal. All the ink user had said was sorry and leapt away. However, his normally inexpressive eyes were screaming for forgiveness. It was something Naruto doubted the boy even realized he was doing. It didn't matter though because in a matter of moments from when the paper was applied… something broke.

Kyubi's chakra gushed out of every pour in his body, and as much as he tried he couldn't stop it. The fox itself growled loudly in his mind. It didn't seem to appreciate the seal either. A tail emerged and Naruto screamed out in agony. This was so different than usual. The chakra was being forced from his seal, but his body wasn't being allowed to transform in order to accommodate it.

He cried out again as another tail sprouted followed quickly by another. Each one felt like it was being ripped out directly from his spine. He clenched his eyes shut as he tried to find some way to stop it, but nothing would work. His own chakra was completely sealed off, and for some reason he couldn't move.

The force of the chakra lifted his body into the air as another tail formed. He barely noticed Sasuke land near him seemingly unbothered by the chakra. His Sharingan spun and the red energy seemed to ark away from him. He raised his sword high in the air.

"You really are frustrating Naruto."

"Sasuke!" Kakashi appeared on the edge of the clearing. He struggled to keep from getting pushed back as the chakra infused wind twisted violently. "Step away from Naruto now!"

The Uchiha cast a bored glance at his old mentor before looking back down. His blood red Sharingan focused entirely on the blonde who had seemingly passed out from the pain even as the chakra continued to pour out of him. Kakashi leapt toward the two as Sasuke's Sharingan stopped.

The world went black.

Naruto groaned as he sat up in filthy water. His eyes settled on the familiar giant bars of Kyubi's cage. The beast glared at him furiously as the red chakra he exuded was sucked out of his cage and into the various tunnels of the awful place. Naruto forced himself to stand on wobbly legs. He turned as the sound of sloshing footsteps drew his attention. Sasuke stood there confidently as he stared down the fox.

"So the one that shares Madara's cursed chakra finally graces me with his presence," the fox said slowly.

"Sasuke… how, how are you here?" Naruto asked.

"It is a rather inconvenient ability of those sinister eyes of theirs. The strongest of the Uchiha have the ability to… limit my power."

"I have no interest in a history lesson from a caged animal," Sasuke said as he strutted up closer to the gate. "I merely wanted to see where Naruto gained his power. I should have figured a dead last like him couldn't survive without an extra source of power."

Naruto grit his teeth in anger by his friend's easy dismissal of his abilities. However, it quickly grew into a grin. The bastard's ego would be hit just that much harder when he was taken out. He was startled from his thoughts as the Kyubi let out a deep bellowing laugh. It reverberated through the halls like dynamite in a cave.

"You cocky little fool. The damned brat has refused my power almost completely. He only pulls from it when he faces the strongest of opponents. While insulting to me, he also pulls what he wants as if it was his own. Do not be so quick as to judge him considering your only abilities were either stolen or given to you."

"I really don't care," Sasuke said as he turned his attention fully to Naruto. "I said I would kill you. But, I am not so pathetic as to do it with you defenseless. I want you to realize your mistake when you insulted the last of the Uchiha."

The Sharingan began to spin and the chakra coursing through the tunnels was retracted and forced back into Kyubi's cage. Naruto felt himself regain some of his strength even as the Uchiha's eyes continued to spin.

"Sasuke!" Kakashi's voice echoed throughout the room.

The entire room started to swirl and pull into itself. Naruto looked around in confusion and even the stoic Sasuke looked surprised.

"Ah this is just perfect!" Kyubi said. It turned and stared down at the blonde. "Brat, your teacher's Sharingan helped drag him into your mind accidentally with the Uchiha. Now, he's trying to forcefully eject the traitor right now." The beast grinned a sadistic grin. "Gaze well into your friend's Sharingan, because for a moment, you will be able to see into the depths of your friend's soul. Just as he has been able to look into yours. What will be your decision once you see the truth I wonder?"

The world melted away to black and Naruto felt like he was floating. A chill ran up his spine as he tried to look around through the eternal

night. The dark tried to grab him… drown him in its vile embrace, but he shook it off. Where was this place? Why was he here? What was going on?

He struggled as the shadows wrapped around him again and pulled him deeper. Then like lightning, it hit him. Emotions, thoughts, memories, his head felt like it was being ripped open as his mind was assaulted ruthlessly. Then, it stopped almost as if it had never occurred. He slowly opened his eyes in realization. These were Sasuke's. As soon as the thought became clear, he felt nauseous. He was in the mind… no the soul of a… of a potential monster. He shook his head furiously and swam as hard as he could through the darkness. There had to be something, anything in here that could be used to redeem, to save his brother.

Time seemed to trickle on in slow agonizing hours as Naruto drifted aimlessly through the sea of night. Finally, buried deep in the darkest of the black, he found a small weak spark of light. It flickered back and forth like the last small ember from a bonfire. The darkness seemed to hate it and tried to attack it relentlessly… and it was winning. The already small spark seemed to grow smaller, but stubbornly refused to completely die. Naruto touched it as if it was the most fragile thing in the world. More memories rushed in, a mother's smile, a father's praise, a brother's attention, a team's kindness, they were wonderful but faded and on the verge of ruin, like old pictures cracked, yellow, and a moment away from turning to dust.

The light blew away from his palm and was once again lost in the darkness. Naruto felt the air pushed from his lungs as a great pressure was pressed down on him. He turned and looked at another spot the size of a mountain. It was so black it seemed even the rest of the shadow was afraid of it. He noticed it was growing quickly and as he neared it he felt a great satisfaction emanating from it. It was being fed, and Sasuke knew it… he wanted it to be fed. Naruto summoned all of his courage and thrust his hand forward… and he wanted to die.

The world slowly came back into focus. The ground was charred into ash and the trees still burned with embers. Yet regardless of the heat, Naruto felt cold. It was the kind of cold that seemed to bury itself deep within his body and would never go away. The paper seal lay crumbled and burning at his feet. How long had he been out? How many tails had been unleashed before it stopped?

He looked up as Kakashi and Sai stood in front of him protectively. Sasuke stared at them impassively as if he was confident he could pass them with a mere thought. Naruto looked back down at the ground and tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but couldn't. His mouth was dry and his stomach churned uncomfortably.

"Ka- Kakashi-sensei," he choked out.

"I know Naruto. I saw everything you just did. Are you alright?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto couldn't say anything, even when he noticed Kakashi was just as shocked and pale as he probably looked. He wasn't okay, not after seeing all that. The images still flowed through his mind and he couldn't stop them no matter how much he begged them to. Konoha burned. His friends slaughtered. And Sasuke stood above the flames. Naruto could feel the satisfaction… the pure relishing feeling Sasuke felt seeing it all… and knowing he was the one that caused it.

Naruto gripped his head and felt he was going to go insane. Why, why did Sasuke feel that way? It felt as if the Uchiha had been born with that hatred inside him. What should he do? Naruto felt so powerless, but one image wouldn't leave his mind. It was of Hinata. Sasuke had subconsciously developed a special hatred for her because she was the only girl in the class that didn't worship him. He had made her death the worst. That sole image consumed Naruto's mind, and the cold he felt vanished. It was replaced with a pure calm determination. The person in front of him had to be stopped. He

would not let Konoha become what his friend wanted. He would not let Sasuke become that thing.

Naruto crouched down and focused all of his chakra to the surface. Kakashi and Sai looked back in shock as the ground cracked and blue chakra swirled around him. The air was like a hurricane and Naruto's serious blue eyes trained themselves squarely on the man he had called brother.

"Kakashi, Sai move."

They barely took a step back when he blasted forward straight at the Uchiha. Sasuke smirked confidently as his Sharingan bared down unflinchingly and his lighting blade was brought up in front of him defensively. He used his speed to vanish and as soon as he disappeared from sight Naruto used his Shunshin. While the chakra shell pushed him forward, he summoned a Kage Bunshin to drop out of the technique while he was sent behind a tree.

Sasuke reappeared and stabbed his sword straight through the clone's heart.

"Hah, pathetic," Sasuke sneered.

"Bunshin Daibakuha!" The clone exploded in giant plume of fire and smoke.

Sasuke was sent flying back through several trees before he flipped to his feet and slid to a stop. His right arm hung uselessly at his side while he tried to focus past the temporary blindness and deafness. He jumped to the side as Naruto flew down from above and buried a Rasengan where he had just been standing. The missing-nin didn't have time to recover as Naruto launched forward again. Bright blue chakra extended from a kunai in his hand.

Naruto swung down as Sasuke used his left hand to wield his lightning powered Kusanagi. The wind infused kunai cut it in half effortlessly and left a large gash across Sasuke's chest. He winced

in pain as blood started to seep out. A Chidori formed in his left hand and he thrust it straight at Naruto's heart.

Naruto blocked with the kunai and Sasuke yelled in pain as the wind chakra cut through his lightning jutsu and claimed the top part of his palm. He jumped back and Naruto halted his attack. The wind chakra dissipating from the kunai.

"Sasuke please give up," Naruto said softly.

"Give up? I am an Uchiha you fool!"

"You need help Sasuke. I… I saw what was in your mind. I don't know if we can save you, but please let me try." Naruto stared at his friend as his eyes pleaded. "Let go of your hatred, please Sasuke. Sakura-chan, Kakashi-sensei, me, everyone, we all miss you! You don't have to be alone or angry. Come back to Konoha and give up your constant desire for power and hatred. I'm begging you!"

"I don't need to be saved! I don't want to be! I have power and I will take more. With these eyes, I am unbeatable and I will kill Itachi. Then, I will take my revenge on everyone whoever wronged me. Starting with the village that refused to give me the power I needed all those years ago!"

"Very well then," Naruto whispered. "Goodbye, Sasuke."

Naruto zipped forward and grabbed the Uchiha's face before he could dodge. The jinchuriki slammed Sasuke's head into the closest tree again and again until the body went limp. He dropped him to the ground and stared down at Sasuke as Kakashi and Sai landed behind him. The jonin placed a comforting hand on the blonde's shoulder.

"I will finish him Naruto. You don't have to have kill Sasuke," Kakashi said.

"No."

"Naruto, we both know he is a threat and likely cannot be reformed. He has to be-."

"I'll do it. Sasuke is my responsibility."

Naruto stepped forward and pulled out a paint brush with some ink from his back pouch. He set to work drawing a seal onto the Uchiha's forehead as silent tears dripped down his face. His drawing hand never shook or twitched even has his shoulders heaved with quiet sobs.

"Naruto… what are you doing?"

"I can't kill him Kakashi-sensei knowing that there is a small chance that he may be redeemed. I won't be the one responsible for ending that last light in his soul. However, he is a threat and realistically he doesn't want to change who he has become. This seal is a compromise."

"I didn't know you knew seal work. It is a skill few know and less can use effectively."

"Jiraiya-sensei drilled the basics of different kinds of seals. He said I was creative enough to come up with the rest on my own." He sniffed as the tears slowed. The talking calming him slightly. "This is going to be a multilayered seal. It will seal away his Sharingan and prevent anyone from taking it or recreating it through a blood sample. It's an altered version of the Hyuga's caged bird seal. The other part will lock Sasuke in his own body with only his thoughts. It is cruel, but hopefully given time to think, he will find the goodness in him and nurture it. If that happens, the seal with de-activate entirely and we'll have back the Sasuke we all knew and called teammate."

"Can it be broken? It would be easy for someone to take him from Konoha and study the seal."

"I've rigged the seal with multiple traps. If he is pulled from the grounding point, which I will be where he is imprisoned, the seal will

disintegrate the body. The same thing will occur with any form of tampering, regardless of how small. If the seal is broken, it will have to come from Sasuke himself."

Naruto finished the tattoo and pressed some chakra into it. The seal seemed to twist slightly before sinking into his head and vanishing into the skin. He put the brush away and slowly stood up. The emotional and physical punishment from the encounter taking its toll. He felt heavy to the point he was concerned he would be crushed by the weight of his sorrow. He had failed and broken his promise, while losing his best friend. But the worst of it all was how much Sasuke seemed to enjoy his hatred and pain. Every step down the path was intentional and desired.

"You know after seeing into his soul. I wander if the Sasuke we knew was the illusion." He turned to his mentor with the tears springing up anew. "Had I just been fooling myself into thinking that Team Seven meant something to him?"

Kakashi smiled sadly and shook his head no.

"I think those memories were more important to Sasuke than we could ever realize. What's more important is that it meant something to you Naruto. Don't ever regret a good memory even if something tarnishes it."

"Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura shouted as she leapt done from the treetops. "The ninja we were fighting disappeared and I lost track of where you guys were. What happened here where's Sasuk-."

Her voice died in her throat as she looked at the battered form of Naruto and then the limp and damaged form of Sasuke. She gasped and ran past Naruto as she searched over their old teammate.

"What's going on? Why is his chakra flowing so slowly?" She stood up and rounded on Naruto. "What did you do Naruto?"

He looked down sadly and clenched his fists.

"Sakura, Sasuke tried to kill Naruto. They fought," Kakashi said.

"No I understand that. I didn't think Sasuke-kun would come willingly and I figured he would be injured, but why is his chakra the way it is?"

"He," Naruto hesitated. "I saw inside his mind Sakura-chan. I had no choice, but to seal him to keep Konoha safe."

She blinked in confusion as if she couldn't wrap her head around the words he had just said. Slowly, her eyes narrowed and a scowl formed on her face. She stomped up to him and slapped him hard across the face as tears threatened to fall from her eyes.

"What do you mean Naruto? You promised me you'd bring back Sasuke, but now you're telling me you sealed him. Answer me Naruto!"

She went to slap him again, but Kakashi caught her hand.

"Sakura, I made the decision to execute Sasuke because I determined he was a threat to the village. Naruto defied my orders and sealed Sasuke because he hoped one day the missing-nin would redeem himself. Do not take your frustrations out on a teammate who has done nothing wrong."

"Teammate? What teammate? There is no team! All of you just took the easy way out and gave up on Sasuke-kun. And Naruto, you, I don't even know who you are anymore. The Naruto I know wouldn't have abandoned his friends. Who you are now… I hate this you."

She turned on her heel and stomped over to Sasuke before slinging him over her shoulder and taking off toward Konoha. Kakashi sighed as Naruto's eyes remained glued to the ground. Sai walked up and put Naruto's arm around his neck before taking off while Kakashi followed closely behind.

"I have some questions for you Sai," Kakashi said as Naruto hung limply with a vacant stare. "I know that paper seal that was on his stomach was not from Sasuke."

"I will answer everything you ask, but I will need help. I promise you though. My loyalty will now be rested squarely on Naruto."

"We should take them now, Itachi," Kisame said as they watched from the trees. "The brat is exhausted."

"No, we do not know if the forced release of his chakra would have any negative effects. It would be best to watch him for now."

"Sounds to me like an excuse." They turned and took off away from the Konoha ninja's. "You sure your not just being nice because he spared your kid brother?"

"Sasuke made the same foolish mistake as Orochimaru did with me. They assumed they knew all of their opponent's abilities and were overconfident. Sasuke himself never considered that the chakra surrounding someone in a Shunshin can disguise another technique from our eyes. Although, it is an impressive and rare feat for someone to be able to double cast techniques as the Nine Tails container did."

"Maybe I should learn a Shunshin technique. Perhaps, I'd be able to beat you then!"

"Hn."

Naruto stared blankly at the small bonfire as the night started to creep across the sky. Kakashi had called for them to halt and delay their return home. While no one wanted to remain away from the village, as in a ninja's world being in the field was always dangerous, they felt it best to listen to Sai far away from Root. Sakura had recommended setting up camp so she could perform medical

checkups on everyone. Although, she would only check up in Sasuke and Naruto's injuries in silence. It had surprised Naruto, but he assumed that she was fulfilling her duties as the team's med-nin.

She was now off sulking at the edge of the camp while she kept guard over the Uchiha's bandaged body. The rest of the group had decided to let her have her space. Sai sat across from Naruto as Kakashi stayed in the best position to strike if necessary. It was a tense situation. Enough so that Naruto appeared to still be on edge despite his complete lack of response to anything so far.

"Well then," Sai said with a forced smile. "I believe the first thing that needs to be done is to remove this cursed seal."

Naruto and Sakura seemed to perk up and stare in shock as Sai stuck out his tongue. The tattooed seal that adorned it looked like it must have been painful to receive. They quickly rushed in closer to see it as their inquisitive natures took over their emotional state.

"It will force my body into paralysis if I speak of anything that might negatively effect Danzo or Root."

"Why the sudden change in heart Sai? I know you have become friends with Naruto and Sakura, but you still hours ago manipulated Naruto's seal. However, just seconds later, you went to protect him when he became defenseless," Kakashi said.

"I'm not sure myself. I just felt… wrong about what I did, and my body acted on its own accord. I feel like I don't want to follow Danzo anymore if it means harming my friends. But, I'm not sure why myself. Emotions are foreign to me, and I don't know how to control them very well. I must read about this when we return."

"It would seem that the training you were put through under Danzo is starting to break down and you are starting to understand and feel morality and empathy." Kakashi cast a glance at his most energetic student. "Naruto does seem to have that effect on people."

Naruto looked down to the ground as the memories of his fight with Haku rushed into his head. Sasuke had said the same thing about moving to protect him. Was he really that pathetic that people felt the urge to keep him safe? No, that wasn't it and he knew it. He was their friend and they would risk themselves for his benefit just as he would for them. His lip twitched slightly into the ghost of a smile and he moved over towards the ink user.

"Sai let me see the seal again. I'll try to remove it."

He did as he was told and Naruto looked at it carefully. It was startlingly similar to the Hyuga's caged bird seal. The same process would work as well… although. He glanced over at Sakura hesitantly.

"Sakura can you… can you remove his tongue?"

The entire camp looked at him in shock.

"She's that intense of a kisser Naruto?" Sai asked.

A vein appeared on Sakura's forehead, but both she and Naruto did nothing to retort.

"The seal is designed to kill you if there is any tampering. I can remove the seal from the tongue easy enough, but if it is still connected to you then you die."

"So she cuts off my tongue, you remove the seal and then she reattaches it?"

"Yes, although I'll have to do some extra things as well."

Sai was silent for a moment before he smiled.

"You really have no idea what you're doing do you?"

Naruto pulled out a kunai as his eye twitched.

"I'm going to cut it out myself!"

Kakashi grabbed Naruto as he made a lunge for the still smiling ink user. Sakura sighed in annoyance and moved closer to Sai as Kakashi struggled to hold Naruto down. She focused chakra into her hands and a blue aura started to form around her fingers. Sai stuck out his tongue without any direction and she cut it off in one clean swipe. It flopped onto her open palm lifelessly.

Naruto pulled out a scroll and scribbled a design onto the parchment. Familiar tendrils of silver smoke shot out of the scroll and wrapped around the markings of the cursed seal. The chakra flared and the seal was ripped out of the flesh and into the scroll. He rolled it up and nodded to his pink haired teammate. She grabbed it wordlessly and went to work healing. After several minutes, she leaned away and walked back over towards Sasuke.

"He won't be able to talk for several hours. Are we going to remain here until then, or should we start heading back?" She asked.

"We'll head back now. Hokage-sama will want to know about the mission."

Kakashi bit his thumb and flew through some hand seals. He slammed his palm into the ground and a dog appeared in a puff of smoke. It was one Naruto had never seen before. The copy-nin handed it a scroll. The dog gave a small growl and sprinted away.

"He'll go on ahead and deliver that message to the Hokage. That way, she'll be expecting us. Let's pack up and go."

Danzo cracked his good eye open as a small burning sensation tickled his good arm. He gave a nod to the guard on his left. Quickly, the Root member rolled up his master's sleeve. Danzo stared emotionlessly at his forearm. Dozens of black tally marks were tattooed into the skin… except one. The thirty-second mark on the middle row was missing… the operative code-named Sai. For the

tally to disappear meant either the agent was dead, or it was possibly, although unlikely, removed. Regardless, contingencies needed to be made. He turned to the one that held his sleeve reverently.

"Take a small squad, if the agent returns with the Nine-Tails group, bring him to me immediately."

The Root member nodded and slunk back into the shadows as Danzo stood. He would need to collect the other elders so that they could provide a unified front against that woman. He started to walk forward and his cane made a soft tap with every step. Why he had yet to feel the Kyubi's presence was meant that it was possible Sai failed, or betrayed him. Either way, things would have to be rectified if his plans were to continue smoothly.

It was near midnight by the time Team Kakashi reached the village gates. Anbu had appeared immediately and escorted them to the Hokage's office. Naruto had become slightly more focused after unsealing Sai, to the point he even realized how ragged he looked. He wished they would at least offer him some kind of shirt, but supposed his state of dress was the last thing anyone was worried about. A sense of nervousness started to grow in the bottom of his gut as they walked up the stairs. A part of him knew that things weren't going to go well. It was a sense of foreboding that seemed to permeate the walls of the tower. Had they felt the Kyubi's chakra, or were they concerned about how he handled Sasuke or Sai? He didn't have a chance to think as they were ushered into the office in silence. As soon as he stepped inside, he knew why he'd been so uneasy.

Tsunade sat behind her desk with a frown on her face, while the three old bastards sat regally in a couch off to the right. From what he could gather from everyone's body language, the old farts invited themselves. No wonder he didn't like this. He fought the urge to glare at Danzo. He hadn't liked the man when he first met him, but after knowing that he used seals on both Sai and him. He down right

hated the man. However, he knew now was not the time to try and settle things. That would come later, and it would probably cause a major uproar. Patience was needed so they could get all the information about Danzo that they could… and then stomp on him.

"Sakura," Tsunade said. "You are dismissed. Come see me in the morning."

The pink haired medic went to argue before looking at the ground with a small nod. She turned and walked out dejectedly and Naruto thought his heart might break. The entire scenario must be awful for her. She must have felt so powerless, and she wasn't even being allowed to see it through to the end.

"Kakashi, you and Sai will deliver the Uchiha to Ibiki. Once the body is secure at the hospital's secure wing, you may take the night off. I will take your full report in the morning. Sai, as requested by your team leader, you are placed under his supervision until I deem otherwise."

"Tsunade, why is my subordinate being placed under Kakashi Hatake's guard?" Danzo asked.

Naruto noticed his timing was perfect. It wasn't soon enough to make him looked panicked, but not to long so it looked like he was calculating his options. The fact that even his conversations were calculated made it that much harder to see through the man's façade.

"He attacked a teammate on a mission. Until all the facts are gathered, he is a prisoner and will be kept under watch by one of my trusted ninja's." Her hazel eyes narrowed at him. "Unless, you know something I don't Danzo."

"Of course not, it was just a matter of curiosity."

Naruto almost smiled at how his Baa-chan had handled the traitorous old fool. The warmongers hands were tied, and he knew it.

Kakashi waved goodbye as he left with everyone else. The room fell quiet as Naruto glanced between the elders and Hokage. This was what he was worried about.

"Are you okay Naruto?" Tsunade asked.

He blinked in surprise. That wasn't what he had been expecting to hear. His fake smile crept up onto his face. He'd have to be okay in front of these people.

"I'll be okay. So what did you need Baa-chan?"

She went to speak when Homura interrupted her.

"Naruto Uzumaki, for what purpose did you learn the sealing arts?"

"I wanted to make it easier to carry the paint around next time I assault the Hokage monument."

"Uzumaki, please answer the question."

Naruto cast a side glance at Tsunade. She nodded with a hidden grin and he felt his confidence rise. Maybe it was time he made these idiots realize who they were dealing with.

"Jiraiya-sensei taught me. He said that it was a request of the Yondaime."

"Why would the Yondaime request this of you?" Koharu asked.

Naruto watched the three elders carefully. They seemed to be very interested in him suddenly, and he wasn't sure, but it wasn't necessarily in a bad way. He wasn't certain if them seeing value in him made it better or far worse than usual.

"I have no idea. I just learned what he taught me."

"And what did he teach you?"

"My abilities are known only by myself, the Hokage, and those I choose to."

"Watch your tone Uzumaki. You should consider our question comes with the utmost authority."

"Careful you old bat, you keep talking like that and you'll think you're in charge around here." Naruto smiled as their eyes narrowed at him. "Unless, you think you already are and have been circumventing the Hokage's authority."

If it had been anyone else, he would have gotten an impressive reaction of denial. However, the old fools were good at hiding their reactions. Although, not good enough to completely mask it. He had hit the nail on the head. The way Tsunade was fighting back her smile helped him realize that he'd hit the nail perfectly.

"We are getting off topic," Homura said as he cleared his throat. "We are here to commend you on the Uchiha's retrieval. It was a wise decision to not kill him. The Sharingan is now safely back in Konoha."

"Sorry, but no it's not."

"What do you mean?"

"I've sealed the Sharingan and any possible means of retrieving and duplicating it away. Once Itachi is dead, and unless Sasuke can atone, thus dispelling the seal, the Sharingan will be extinct."

"It would be wise for you to alter the seal then Uzumaki," Danzo said. "The Sharingan is too valuable a weapon for Konoha to lose."

Naruto clenched his fists and inhaled deeply.

"Look you miserable old bastards! I didn't seal Sasuke for you. I did it because I hope that someday my friend would return to us. I did it

because so many people have died and gotten hurt because of some damn eyes. I can't unseal him, but even if I could I wouldn't."

"Your naïve views of the world will only serve to weaken you and this village."

"And yours would do nothing, but bring one war after another. I don't like any of you. I don't answer to any of you. I know you old bastards are plotting and going behind my Hokage's back and I promise you that some day you will slip up, and I'll be the one to bring in your heads."

The room fell silent as everyone stared at Naruto in disbelief. He had just essentially called three of the highest ranking members in the village traitors. His grin became more fox like as he stared down at them. He wasn't bluffing in his promise. Every single word was his oath, and he would see it through.

"Now if you guys would leave, I have a mission to discuss with my leader."

"You lack the authority to dismiss us genin," Koharu said tightly.

"But I do and I agree with my ninja. You three have been deliberately trying to diminish my authority as Hokage. I've played your little political games and had my hands tied, but not much longer."

"What are you implying Tsunade?"

"What ever you read into it Koharu. Now get out of my office, my ninja is here to debrief me."

The elders stood and walked out slowly as the tension seemed to vanish upon their dismissal. Naruto and Tsunade sported mirroring grins. She reached into her desk and pulled out a small container of sake. He waited in silence as she poured herself a cup and took a sip.

"I know today was hard for you so I won't make you talk about it right now. I'm sorry for having to have you handle those three on your own, but until there is proof I can't do anything. Hell, even dismissing them from my office could get me in hot water."

"No problem, it was great how you hinted about proof. They'll go on a crazed chase to find it first and then you'll have them."

"Oh so you caught on to that, you've gotten pretty smart brat." She took another sip. "But, they won't fall for it. Aside from Danzo, I don't think the other two have any traitorous intentions. They're just very closed minded."

"Maybe."

"I understand you will be Hinata's supporter during her fight next week."

His eyes widened in surprise, both because of rapid change in subject and her knowledge of the event.

"Yeah I am."

"After her fight, I want to talk with you about some things. It would just be Jiraiya, you, and myself."

"… Okay, about what?"

"I will tell you then."

He nodded and turned to head out.

"Naruto, I am sorry things turned out like they did with Sasuke. Regardless of how you feel or what Sakura says… you did good brat."

The stars and moon stood high in the night sky like ever present sentinels. The village of Konoha had long since grown quiet and the

citizens had drifted off to sleep. However, one training field far from the village itself was under assault. Numerous craters dotted the once flat and unmarred grass. Naruto panted heavily as his right arm shook from over use. He grit his teeth and forced his chakra into his aching hand once again.

He summoned another clone to help push the wind element in as he held the shape. After seeing Tsunade, he had gone straight to the field. Sleep wasn't going to come to his mind in its current turmoil. He was drained emotionally, more so than he ever could remember. Regardless of what everyone said, he had failed to save his friend and Sakura truly did hate him for it. His team, no his family, was gone, and it hurt far more than even learning the truth about Sasuke's ambitions.

He felt the wind infused Rasengan reach its peak and he thrust his hand forward into another clone. His eyes grew wide as the ball of chakra started to shake in his palm.

"Crap!"

The sphere destabilized and exploded before it impacted the clone. The explosion shook the surrounding area and sent Naruto flying backwards towards the woods. He winced and braced for impact. It never happened as someone caught him and landed on the ground softly. He glanced behind him as Hinata searched him over immediately. She frowned as she saw his trembling hand.

She moved over to it quickly and stared checking it for damage.

"I'm okay Hinata."

"So you're the med-nin now?" She shot a stern look at him before rolling his calloused hand around. "Its not broken, but it is severely strained. What on Earth were you doing that caused this much damage to your arm?"

"A jutsu that Ero-sensei and I thought up. I've still got a long way to go with it. What are you doing out here anyways?"

She pushed some of her healing chakra into his hand in an attempt to soothe the strain. He absently noted that it was pleasant, but whether it was due to her medical technique or presence he didn't know.

"I had to ask Hokage-sama something and she told me about the mission. I wanted to make sure you are alright."

He gently pulled his hand away and stood up.

"I'm okay. I just thought I'd come out here and train my thoughts away."

"Do you want a sparring partner, or someone to talk to?"

"Not really."

"Then, you want to be left alone?"

"No! I don't… I don't really know Hinata. I'm not sure whether I'm angry or sad or what. Part of me wants desperately to talk to someone, but the other part of me just wants to figure it out on my own." He looked at her fully. "I'm just kind of mixed up right now."

She nodded and sat down under the closest tree.

"I'll just sit here and watch over you then. If you want to take a break to talk for a minute or several hours, I'll listen. If you just want me to sit in silence, that's fine as well."

He nodded and mumbled a sincere thank you. Two clones popped into existence and he started shaping his chakra again. The clone started pushing the wind element into it and immediately a dull roar started echoing through the field. She watched in awe as the wind was pushed away from him and out across the grass. He yelled out

and thrust it forward again. It held together upon impact and the clone was vaporized… along with twenty square feet of ground.

The dust slowly cleared to show Naruto standing as his shoulders heaved. His hand still stretched out in front of him. He turned and almost started laughing at the sight of Hinata with her jaw hanging on the ground. He didn't think it was possible for her to show total unrestrained surprise.

"N-Naruto, that was amazing!"

"Not really, that's not even halfway complete yet."

Her eyes almost popped out of her head at the implication of how much further the attack could improve. He looked down at his hand sadly.

"It was luck you know. Defeating Sasuke would have been much harder if he had taken me seriously."

Her expression changed immediately. Concern shown from her lavender eyes as she looked up at him.

"I mean. He didn't try to activate his cursed seal, and he made a really stupid move in attacking my Bunshin. It really pisses me off that I won because of surprise."

"Luck is a major part of any fight Naruto. Regardless of how strong you are."

"I know, but the entire thing just feels so cheap now that it happened. I mean, where was the fight to end all fights? Where was the point in which he realized how badly he messed up? All of these stupid random things just make it seem like what I did was really irrelevant. I hate it. I hate that it was all luck and coincidence!"

Silence fell between them like a massive wall. He clenched his fists and stared at the ground angrily. She stood up and positioned her

head so that he would look at her.

"Naruto-kun, do you like the fact that you met me?"

"Of course Hinata, how could you even ask me that?"

"Would you have ever noticed me if I hadn't fought Neji-nisan in the chunin exams."

He looked at her dumbstruck and his mouth opened and closed slightly like a confused fish. After a few moments, he looked down in shame.

"No, it wouldn't have been any different than half of the other academy students that I never knew what happened to."

"And do you believe that fate was what did that?"

"What? No, I told Neji that fate is crap."

"So then it was luck that Neji-nisan and I fought."

"Yeah bad luck, you almost got killed!"

"And if that hadn't have happened, would we be talking here now? Would I be as strong and would the branch house nearly be completely unsealed?"

His eyes widened in awe as he thought about what she said. It was amazing how simple and yet effective her explanation had been. He felt a smile tug at his lips, and it only grew wider as she gave him a small happy smile with her eyes closed. He shook his head and sighed.

"Man I really am an idiot. How could I have not noticed someone as awesome as you until a few weeks ago?"

"Perhaps, I wasn't as awesome before."

"No… I think I was just really dense."

Lee sat up groggily in his tent and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He would have guard duty next, and assumed his time was almost up. He pulled on his weights and leg warmers, then strapped his small flask to his belt. His neck popped as he stretched it out and stepped outside. The woods were always so dark at night, but the sounds of the animals made it seem so lively. It just demonstrated how the springtime of youth never ended with nature.

He hoped that their mission tomorrow would go smoothly. Team Gai had been assigned to drive out some bandits from the caves near a small town. An easy mission to be sure, but the distance involved made it too risky to send out any genin team. Neji had taken Gai's place as lead, while his sensei had been tasked with another mission… speaking of his teammate.

"Where is Neji?" He glanced around the camp. "Wasn't he supposed to take first watch?"

He heard something behind him and turned. It came from Tenten's tent. He crept over to it quietly and listened. A puzzled look came over his face as he could have sworn there was a second person in the tent. Why would Neji be in the tent with…? He stepped away quietly and made his way over to the small fire at the center of the camp.

It made sense that they had finally decided to admit their feelings for one another. It was fairly obvious to him that they had a mutual attraction to one another. Lee could always see that the only reason nothing moved forward with them was because of Neji's seal. Well things had moved forward with them, but not so… openly. Now that it was gone, the last excuse between them was as well. Neji felt that he had a life ahead of him and had no desire to hide it.

He leaned back against a trunk and looked up through the trees. It made him very happy that they had finally found happiness with

each other. Both his teammates deserved it. His eyes drifted back to the tent as a sly smile crept up on his face. However, shirking duty during a mission couldn't be left unpunished. He brought his thumb up in his infamous nice guy pose and summoned the loudest voice he could.

"Yosh! The height of your flames of youth exceed even the greatest of mountains!"

Two immense killing intents spiked from inside the tent, but Lee continued to smile. The killing intent was laced with something else akin to pure embarrassment. He hoped that the embarrassment would serve to make them more cautious in their private activities. After all, Gai-sensei would be on permanent watchdog mode if he knew.

Authors Notes:

I ask ahead of time for you to let some of the points flesh out a little before anyone gets riled up. A lot of the motivations for the characters, especially Sai and Sakura, will be delved into more clearly next chapter. So please keep your final judgments on hold until then. As far as Sasuke goes… if you have any arguments in regards to his… villainous personality. I would recommend making sure you are up to date with the manga. I haven't really done anything that goes against what Kishimoto has already done.

Well enough about that. Hope you're enjoying this and as always take a look at our original stuff on the WSE website.

Whirl

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 6:

Kakashi walked into the Hokage's office with Sai in tow. His lone eye lazily glanced about from over the top of his orange book. The office was empty aside from his leader, her assistant, and the pet pig. Tsunade rested her chin behind her hands and looked at the Root member calculatingly. He watched Sai cast a cautious glance at Shizune.

"Hokage-sama, forgive my impertinence, but is it wise to have your assistant here given the nature of this conversation?" Sai asked. The ink user had the faintest look of nervousness on his face. "I know she has been an informant to the elders before, and for my own safety, I wish for what I divulge to remain in this office."

"I can assure you Shizune will not make the same mistake again. If she does, I'll have her executed for treason and endangering the life of a fellow nin," Tsunade said as Shizune gulped quietly. "Now tell me what Danzo has been plotting and why you now choose to bring this to my attention. You can start with the latter."

"I have come to view Naruto as a comrade and do not wish to see him harmed."

"Not a good enough reason."

"Yes I agree." He took a deep breath. "However, in order to explain my newfound loyalty I must give a little background of my most recent mission. Specifically, the paper seal I place on Naruto. It was

Danzo's plan to use the seal to temporarily release the Nine Tailed Beast's full power."

Tsunade's eyes narrowed dangerously and the temperature dropped rapidly. Kakashi's laid back demeanor had also changed as his lone eye focused entirely on the ink user. He didn't miss the boys attempt to stifle a shudder.

"Explain!"

"Danzo had hoped that by releasing the beast's power it would reinvigorate the diminishing fear and disdain the villagers had for Naruto. It was his plan that he would then have been able to prove Naruto's instability, and turn him into a weapon, or worse, kill him."

"And you went along with this plan." Sai nodded. "And had a change of heart afterward?"

"Yes, I had no choice bu-."

Tsunade slammed her palms on top of her table and stood up on her feet as fury danced in her eyes.

"You always have a choice!"

"No, while the cursed seal was in place I was unable to disobey."

"Yet, you were able to turn on him once you had possibly permanently damaged the seal!"

"Yes, I believe my fear of Naruto's power overpowered my sense of self-preservation."

She sat back down slowly without lessening her glare. Sai stared at her with a look akin to pleading, or as close to a facial expression as Sai could muster.

"Hokage-sama, I had no idea how truly malevolent the fox's power was until I experienced it. Even though the Uchiha cancelled the

transformation, the small bit of power I felt was indescribable. It made me realize how dangerous a game Danzo was playing. You must understand. I was raised not to question orders or even think for myself. My mind, it doesn't work like a normal ninja's. I do not comprehend consequences because I was not to be concerned with them. However, the fear inspired by the Kyubi's power easily overcomes even the most rigid training."

"So your fear is what is driving you to this?"

"No!" Sai looked almost frantic as he leaned forward. "Seeing that power and feeling it, I know Naruto has to face that every single moment of his life. I am in absolute awe in how he has not given into the power, or at least been driven mad from it." He looked down at the ground. "I… I think he is someone that I admire. He is someone that I want to stand behind."

Tsunade's gaze softened slowly, but did not lose its scrutiny, even as the smallest of smiles threatened to tug at her lips. She glanced over at Kakashi who gave her a slight nod. His eye delved absently back to his orange book. Sai stood rigidly staring at the Hokage with a mixture of emotions across his face. The poor boy had no idea how to deal with them. It was like a dam breaking. Just because he had been taught to bury emotions did not mean he didn't have them. They were repressed and ignored but now that they were free… well it was obvious he was unprepared for them.

She sighed and gave him one last warning look before she pulled out a piece of paper and started to jot down an order.

"You have yet to fully prove your loyalty. So until I deem otherwise, you will remain under the authority of Kakashi Hatake. This is also a means of protecting you from any retaliation from Danzo."

Sai smiled, one that was slightly less awkward than usual. It seemed more genuine.

"Thank you Hokage-sama. I will prove myself to you," he said with a bow.

"I hope that you do. Now Kakashi, I would like your opinions of the mission."

Kakashi snapped his book shut and pocketed it.

"I assume you mean in how our young ninja's behaved?" She nodded silently. "Sakura fulfilled all expectations of a chunin and med-nin to their fullest. She correctly deduced who needed the most urgent care and effectively administered said care."

"And her alteration with Naruto?"

"It was a poor decision on her part, but it did not affect her professional duties."

"Alright, I have already spoken with her of this, but wished for your insight as to whether more punishments should be administered."

"Tsunade-sama?"

"She is on a strict hospital regimen for the week with half pay. It will keep her from visiting the Uchiha endlessly. I will also not have my apprentice blame others for circumstances they have no control over. I am pleased though that she did feel guilty for her actions once she got herself under control." Tsunade sighed and stared at Kakashi wearily. "Did Naruto make the right choice?"

"Naruto was… Naruto. I saw everything he saw, and I can say with complete confidence Sasuke would have become the single greatest threat to the village. Naruto is to be commended in thinking of a compromise and showed both compassion and sound decision making in how he dealt with the scenario."

Tsunade gave a slow nod in agreement.

"I sent the picture of the seal you drew to Jiraiya last night. He verified that the seal will do everything Naruto said it would. The lecher added that he was still amazed at how Naruto kept improving through sheer creativity."

"I must admit… I was taken back by his ingenuity during his fight. Even if Sasuke hadn't been careless, I believe the outcome would have been the same."

"Is it true that he created a Kage Bunshin while he was performing a Shunshin?"

"Yes. I didn't even know that he had done it." Kakashi's eye turned up into a smile. "He really has grown."

"That he has." Tsunade smiled softly as she looked like she was remembering something fondly. She shook her head and stared at him more seriously. "Now, there is another matter I want you and Sai to look into. This mission will require absolute secrecy and should be considered S-class understood."

Both Sai and Kakashi snapped to attention. The room becoming much more tense at the Hokage's tone.

"This morning Anko Mitarashi came in. She realized at some point last night that Orochimaru's cursed seal has vanished." The two ninja's eyes widened in surprise. "Our spies have also indicated that Orochimaru was in pursuit of Sasuke during your mission. Given that we know Itachi Uchiha is Kisame Hoshigaki's partner, I believe that Orochimaru may have been killed. Kakashi! You, Sai, and Shizune will depart in four hours and search the environment of your last mission. You are to verify that Orochimaru has been eliminated. Dismissed!"

Sakura looked up from her clipboard and over at the clock hanging on the wall. She would be done in another six hours, and then she could go check up on Sasuke-kun. She sighed and started to walk

toward the next patient's room. Tsunade-shisho had been correct in punishing her. Treating Naruto the way she did was wrong, and she would have to apologize to him at some point. Her own anger at the situation had blinded her to how Naruto must have felt being the actual person to stop their troubled teammate.

Besides, she knew there was still good in Sasuke-kun, and if Naruto's seal worked the way it should, then Sasuke would be up and about in a few days. If his seal worked. Her pace slowed as that thought rang through her head. Naruto was the fool and dead last of their class. He had grown amazingly, but was still stupid sometimes and she knew seals were intensely complex. What if he had messed up and permanently locked Sasuke-kun into a coma?

Naruto sneezed violently as he grabbed a pair of chopsticks. The wonderful aroma of beef ramen made his stomach growl hungrily. He attacked it voraciously and quickly started slurping it down while his thoughts absently drifted towards his conversation with Hinata the previous night. It had been so comforting to have someone around, and she was extremely patient with his chaotic emotions. Her logic also made a lot of sense, and he was sure that he would have been in a much worse mood today if she hadn't shown up.

He gulped down another mouthful. The entire thing was Sasuke and Sakura hurt, but it was tolerable at least. He had decided he wouldn't beat himself up for the decisions of others. Sakura just needed some time to calm down. Sasuke had chosen a path that he just couldn't relate to, and he wouldn't put the village at risk just to be selfish. Hopefully, the bastard would get his act together and the seal would dispel. If not… if not then that was that and he would lose his family.

Family… it was a word that he couldn't relate to, but it carried so much desire for him. There were times where he could almost imagine what it would be like, as if even the slightest hint would give him the full realization of it. He had long given up the hope of having a parental figure, but he still hoped that someday he would find someone that he could share his life with. A family where he could

smother a wife and children with all the affection he never received. He'd do it so much they'd get sick of it.

He slowed down his eating as a distant look formed in his eyes and quiet smile found its way to his face. A wife who he could hold and be vulnerable around, but would laugh at his antics. A daughter who he could be over protective of and threaten any and all boys over. A son who would want to be just like him except smarter. A home that was nice with plenty of room, but still cozy.

He clenched his chopsticks and shook his head as he dove back into the ramen. Thoughts like that were going to get him depressed and he couldn't afford that now. He had too many problems to deal with in the present, and worrying about dying old and alone wasn't going to help. Hinata was counting on him to help her save her clan. He couldn't do that if he was moping and pathetic. It wouldn't make their date any fun either. Not that he had any idea what a date was for anyways, but he knew he was supposed to make it fun and something enjoyable… that was about it. Thank God, Teuchi was giving him nightly lessons at dinner about what to do and what not to do.

The weeks passed by quickly for the ninja of Konoha. The remains of Orochimaru were never found. Only a horribly scorched tree branch was left to hint at the battle. Sai remained by Kakashi's side at all times, as Root members spied from the shadows and waited for any chance to strike down their ex-member. Naruto, Hinata, and the rest of their secret team succeeded in removing all of the cage bird seals from the branch family.

Naruto zipped up his familiar orange and black jacket as he stared at himself in the mirror. In one hour, Hinata was going to be in the fight of her life. He loaded a kunai into his wrist holster and checked over his gear one last time. From what he had heard, he needed to be prepared just incase someone decided to try something. Apparently, the Elder was a lot like the Danzo and his lackeys. He slapped his palms on his face.

"Let's do this!"

Hinata tried to bury the nervousness she felt in her belly as she sat back down on her bed. Regardless of how much she had planned for this and no matter how prepared she and everyone was, the magnitude of this event and the repercussions were going to be extreme… and that's only if things went according to plan. If they did not, she shuddered to think about what would happen to everyone. Forgiveness and mercy were not words in the Hyuga's staunch vocabulary.

She clenched her fist amongst the sheets. There would be no turning back once she began, and if her family was going to continue she couldn't falter. However, she was well aware of the risks. Hanabi, her father, or herself in any assortment could end up dead. On shaky legs she stood up and looked around her room. This was the last time she would be able to see it that she knew. With a deep breath, she tightened the obi to her battle kimono. She would have preferred her regular clothing, but tradition dictated all involved must wear formal Hyuga garb.

Her eyes focused and her resolve was cemented as she pushed her door open. Shino leaned up against the wall on her right. He nodded silently and followed her towards the back of the compound where the fight would be held. She wondered where Naruto was. His infectious confidence would be great support for her. His presence would also put the Elder on edge. He had never been quiet about his distaste for the blonde.

"Out of my way you stuck up bastard!"

A smile immediately crept up onto her face as she turned around. A main branch member was sent flying through an adjacent hallway as Naruto stomped around the corner.

"I swear to God! I am going to create a jutsu that permanently eliminates every stick you guys have up your-."

"Naruto, you are late. How do I know this? Because I arrived on time," Shino said as Hinata tried to stifle a giggle.

"Blame that idiot! He wouldn't believe me when I said I was part of Hinata's support team."

"Regardless, you are still late."

"It's okay Shino-kun, we still have enough time."

The bug user nodded silently and the group started to make their way through the compound. For Hinata, each step seemed to be harder to take, her heart seemed to beat harder, and the weight on her shoulders seemed to grow heavier. She mentally shook off her distress and focused her eyes straight ahead as she lifted her chin up.

They exited the halls and emerged outside into the battlefield. The ground was made up of pearl white sand and lined with sculpted rocks that many of the more regal Hyuga sat in. The main branch stood behind them under the shade of the eves, while the branch members remained in a balcony that encircled the ring. The sun shown down beautifully and seemed to make the sand sparkle. It was a breathtaking sight, and a complete disguise for the bloody history that stained the earth deep bellow the sand.

Hinata's eyes cut over to the top of the ring. Her father sat regally in the center of an elevated platform with the Elder to his right and Hanabi to his left. The Elder's supporters stood behind the three. It made Hinata almost wince. Her sister's entourage was significantly larger than her two escorts. What was worse though, was that her father sat firmly by her sister's side. It was a heavy insult as it demonstrated his favor towards his younger daughter.

They made their way over to the other elevated platform directly across from the first. It was designated the challengers corner. Essentially, they had done everything possible to make it clear that she was not welcome. If it had been a few years earlier, she would

have been forced to fight back tears. The sadness at being despised by her family was worse than any of the injuries she had received during her missions. However now, it only served to fuel her determination. She would make sure that no other Hyuga had to experience what she had. What every single branch member had to experience.

The gathered Hyuga murmured excitedly and stole glances at her group.

"Hinata," Hiashi's voice cut over the crowd. "What is the meaning of bringing non- Hyuga to this occasion? You very well know this is a clan matter."

She motioned for Naruto and Shino to sit down and mumbled a silent prayer Naruto would remain calm for the time being. Her eyes stared unflinchingly into her fathers.

"I am well within my right to have supporters of my choosing."

"It is still in poor taste to bring in outsiders."

"It is forbidden for anyone of the branch family to take sides within fights for the heir, and the main branch will not go against the Elder and clan heads vote. This would leave me without any supporters… unless that is your intention father."

She stared at him defiantly even as his eyes grew slightly colder than their usual icy glare. The smallest trace of killing intent seemed to radiate off of the Elder. It was faint like a taste in the wind to the point where she wondered if it was even there. However, both Shino and Naruto seemed to let a little of theirs off in her grandfather's direction. The taste in the air disappeared instantly. Leave it to her friends to make the message clear. No one was to disrupt her fight.

"Very well, it is within the laws of our clan," Hiashi said. "Are the two heiresses prepared?"

The sisters nodded and stood up from their respective platforms. They silently walked towards the center of the field. The warm sand wrapped around their bare feet and a gentle breeze coursed throughout the ring. Hanabi's eyes attempted to burn holes through her older sister and an angry scowl marred her otherwise cute features. Hinata looked down at her shorter sister calmly as they stopped mere feet from each other… striking distance.

"All techniques are permitted, only weapons are not allowed," Hiashi said. "Fighting stances!"

The two sunk down effortlessly into their stances. Hanabi predictably was in the basic Juken while Hinata brought her hands up in defensive position. Several of the members raised their eyebrows and looked at each other in confusion because of Hinata's choice of stance. They quickly fell silent as Hiashi raised his hand high into the air. Everyone present seemed to stop breathing as the tension in the arena skyrocketed.

"Begin!"

Hanabi's Byakugan flared to life and she exploded forward leaving a wave of sand in her wake. She brought her right palm back and charged chakra into it.

"Hakke Rokujuyon Sho!" Hanabi cried out as she attacked with an insanely fast barrage of strikes.

Hinata fought back her surprise. Her sister didn't even have to wait for her to fall in her circle of divination. It was an impressive feat that even Neji-nisan wasn't able to perform at that age. She clenched her teeth as her younger sister struck sixty-four points on her body and forced chakra into each strike. It was painful, but Hinata knew she had to get hit if her point was going to be made. She forced herself to remain standing as Hanabi jumped back and relaxed.

"You're pathetic sister. You couldn't even defend yourself against that level of attack."

"Hanabi," Hinata said with a small smile. "It's not that I couldn't."

She vanished from where she was standing in a show of pure speed. Hanabi froze as two finger tips pressed against the back of her neck. Hinata stared down calmly. Even if the Byakugan gave a nearly complete field of vision, it couldn't register significantly high speeds and were really no different from regular eyes in that aspect.

"I just wanted to show you how ineffective the Hyuga style has become."

Hinata smiled gently as she noticed Hanabi shake slightly. She reached her hand around and gently rubbed her younger sister's cheek, who was startled by the action. Hinata looked down almost motherly.

"You know Hanabi. You are a very pretty girl. You should smile more and scowl less."

Hanabi snarled and whipped around with a furious palm strike. Hinata blocked it effortlessly, never losing the kind smile. Her sister attacked harder and more visciously as her anger increased. However, every strike thrown was blocked or evaded with ease.

"I can tell how hard you've worked Hanabi. Your Juken is nearly flawless, and is far beyond mine. However." Hinata ducked under an arcing palm and leaned in while placing her fingers on Hanabi's forehead. "You are far too predictable because of it."

Hanabi's eyes grew wide in both shock and fear. Her eyes watered slightly before she shook her head frantically and spun.

"Kaiten!"

A dome of pure blue chakra pushed out from her body and threatened to knock Hinata away. The elder sister pushed chakra into her feet to grip the ground and charged her right palm. Hinata

thrust her hand forward through the dome and snatched her sister's arm, halting her rotation and ending the technique instantly.

Hanabi stared in disbelief at the hand clutching her arm and then slowly drifted her eyes up to Hinata's face. The young girl collapsed onto her knees in the sand as tears rolled down her cheeks. Hinata kneeled down in front of her sister and pulled her into a tight hug. Her heart twisted with sadness as her sister gripped her kimono and started to sob openly.

Hinata knew Hanabi never wanted to fight her. The young girl, while serious and even a little cold, was a kind girl at heart. However, the expectations of a disgruntled old man and his power hungry followers had ensnared her. They had kept pushing her and chiseling away at everything they didn't want until they had molded the perfect Hyuga stone statue. They never gave a second thought to the little girl they had trapped within the stone.

Hinata assumed her total victory must have been a nearly unbearable blow to her sister. However, it also destroyed the prison they had built around her. So while it hurt now, in the end her sister was free, and after the tears had dried. Hinata was confident she would finally be able to see her sister's smile after so many years.

She stood slowly and pulled Hanabi up with her while she motioned for Naruto to come over and take her sister. He did quickly and scooped up the child in his arms and made his way back over to Shino. He set her down gently between Shino and himself as she sniffed and stared at the ground. Hinata gave one last smile before she turned back around and her gaze hardened into a much more serious one.

It appeared that the entire clan was in complete shock. Even the usually stoic Neji, who stood at the edge of the balcony above, seemed taken back by the fight. She wasn't sure if it was because she won, Hanabi broke down, or how easily the fight was won that seemed to have them lost for words. Her eyes drifted up to the platform where her father and grandfather sat. The head seemed to

be struggling to maintain his unimpressed composure, while the Elder was barely hiding the fact that he was seething.

"Hinata please kneel down before us," Hiashi said. She obeyed quietly without ever looking away. "It appears that you have become much stronger than the last time I saw you."

"Surprise is easily achieved when one goes unnoticed," Hinata said.

"It also allows for one to become unruly," the Elder spoke. "While it seems that you have become stronger, I still find it difficult to approve of you as heiress of the clan."

"Would you please instruct me on your reasons for this Elder?"

"As you are well aware, the head of the family is responsible for not only running the clan, but also upholding the traditions and teachings that make our clan so prestigious."

"I am aware of this yes."

"Yet, you have demonstrated an absolute disregard for the Juken, and a gross perversion of many other facets of our style. You may have demonstrated the illusion of strength with your blasphemous techniques, but it is not that of the Hyuga and thus should not be allowed to infect the rest of our teachings."

"I find your accusations rather narrow minded."

"Watch your tongue you insolent-."

Hiashi raised his hand to silence the Elder.

"Hinata you will address us with respect, but I will allow you to make your views known as it will factor into our judgments of you."

"Thank you Hiashi-sama," Hinata said with a small bow. She didn't miss the slight wince her father gave. "As demonstrated in my fight

with Hanabi, the Juken can be negated rather simply if the opponent has a high enough chakra capacity."

"Explain."

"By forcing my chakra through my system, I essentially created a shield that repelled my attackers own chakra. This rendered any form of Juken and its subsequent techniques useless to the point I did not have to even defend myself."

Mummers broke out amongst the crowd again. Hinata kept her breathing even and wouldn't let her eyes drift away from her father who was staring at her intently. Hiashi raised his hand and the ring fell silent again.

"Your technique, while interesting, is flawed in that the greater chakra will win."

"Agreed, but when coupled with blocking, movement, and chakra control it proves to be a substantial benefit to the user."

"Perhaps, but what of your refusal to use our style?"

"It is too predictable. Anyone who has seen one skilled Hyuga fight essentially can anticipate exactly how another will move and act. A good ninja would have knowledge of the entire fight before it even started."

"So you would toss aside generations of teachings?"

"No," Hinata shook her head. "I would encourage that the Hyuga diversify. Our style has no jutsu outside of Clan techniques. We rely entirely on our Byakugan and chakra based attacks. There are enemies who can seal chakra away and blind our eyes. If that were to happen, we would be less of a threat than an academy student."

"You have become quite the heretic girl, and insult the clan with your words," the Elder said. "We teach what we do because it is the

greatest. It cannot be improved upon."

"Would you like to test that theory out grandfather?"

"What?"

Hinata stood up.

"Regardless of your complaints, Hyuga law dictates that I am the heiress even without your permission. However, you seem to think my views make me inferior. As a former clan head and master of our style, I wonder if you have the courage to prove yourself right."

"That's enough Hinata!" Hiashi said as his and the Elder's Byakugan activated. "While you are correct that you are the next in line, you still lack the authority to say as you please."

"Actually that is incorrect Hiashi," Hinata said as an edge found its way to her voice. "I will say as I wish. Just because you refuse to stand up to the whims of a foolish old man does not mean I will do the same!"

"What are you saying?"

"You are the clan head, yet you allow the Elder and his minions to dictate everything you do."

"I follow our family's customs as you seem so intent on spitting upon."

"You hide behind them! You let our family be separated and abused by a few people that are so disillusioned by their own greed that they would rather see the clan ruined than face any form of change that may threaten their authority."

Hiashi and the Elder's killing intents swept out across the ring and nearly flattened the majority of the crowd. Naruto grinned and placed a comforting hand on the startled Hanabi's back, while Shino's bugs

buzzed about excitedly. Hinata stood tall even as they glared down at her.

"You traitorous wench!" The Elder bellowed. "How dare you speak to me in such a manner!"

"Hinata you had best choose your next words very carefully," Hiashi said. "You may be the successor, but you are quickly coming upon a ledge that you should not cross."

"I will cross it! I will cross it to save this clan from you and the Elder! I will cross it because you are too much of a coward not to! Hiashi Hyuga, head of the clan, I exorcise my right as heiress to challenge you for leadership of the clan. Right now."

The killing intents vanished in an instant and the entire ring went still.

"What?" Hiashi paled considerably as any anger he had in him vanished.

"I challenge you for the position of clan head Hiashi."

"Do you know what that means?"

"It means that if you win… I die and Hanabi will be made heir, just like grandfather wants."

"Hinata, do not do this. Your acts up until now have been disgraceful, but are still forgivable. There is no turning back from this if you pursue it. You have grown strong, but there is a great difference between your sister and myself."

"I am aware of that difference and I fully realize the risks associated with this. However, if the clan is going to be saved, I have no other choice." Hinata smiled. It was a smile filled with so much sadness that even the Elder seemed to be taken back by it. "I don't know what happened to the father three years ago who shouted at the Elder that he would not remain calm when it was recommended to

seal me. I do not know where the father went that sounded like he wanted to protect me. What I do know is after today, my family will finally become whole again, even if I have to tear it down completely first."

The head of the family sighed and stood. His eyes stared down at his daughter with an unreadable expression. He took each step firmly, but slowly as if he was attempting to stall the inevitable. Hinata walked up purposefully and was in front of him before he ever reached the center of the ring. She stared up at him with a fierce determination as the wind blue her long dark hair to the side. He looked down at her in silence as the world seemed to slow for the both of them. His eyes closed slowly then opened into a glare that promised a vicious fight.

"I never did wish for this to ever come to pass Hinata." His voice came across as a whisper hidden in the breeze.

"I know, and I am sorry I had to speak such harsh words to you. However, you have made your place clear. There was a time when you sought to do what I am right now. At some point, you stopped trying. I believe you had your reasons, but they are not mine."

She turned away from him and walked back to the center of the ring as he followed her. She faced him again and they gave a slight bow before settling in their preferred stances. It appeared to be a mirror image of the previous match, but the tension had risen far higher than before.

"Hiashi, I expect you to put this girl in her place. Show her no mercy," the Elder said as he glowered down at them. "Demonstrate the full fury of the style that she so easily dismissed."

"Go Hinata! Show these idiots what you can really do!" Naruto cheered as he pumped his fist into the air.

The two fighters exploded towards each other and clashed in a twister of sand and sorrow. Her chakra infused fist connected

painfully with his calloused palm. They stood there glaring at each other as the sand fell like rain, in their subconscious strength contest. The last grain hit the ground and they erupted into a vortex of strikes and blocks. Jaws dropped in awe of the speed and precision of each of the competitors, while Naruto's grin stretched wider and wider.

She dropped into a crouch and pushed off with her hands while she sent a teeth cracking heel kick to his jaw. He was sent flipping into the air before he righted himself and flung his palm down.

"Hakke Hasangeki!"

A wave of white chakra burst from his hand and rushed down towards her as the air seemed to rumble from the attack. Her eyes narrowed. The ark was too wide for her to dodge. She quickly focused her chakra into thin beams that emanated from the center of her palms. Her hands flew effortlessly around the front of her body and formed a webbed shield.

"Shugohakke Rokujuyon Sho!"

The techniques clashed in a violent explosion that shook the surrounding area. Hinata grit her teeth as her arms strained against the force of her father's attack. He truly was the strongest member of the clan. He was slightly slower than her, but he made up for it with crushing power and a chakra that was far more oppressive than hers. She was just lucky she had more chakra overall.

She swung the beams forward like two whips while he slowly fell back toward the ground. A moment before the whips struck, he spun in the air and a sphere of chakra surrounded him knocking her technique away. She rushed forward as two familiar lion heads encased her hands. They crashed into Hiashi's diminishing technique and sent the sphere wobbling off to the edge of the ring. He dispelled the technique and tumbled across the sand. His head snapped up just in time to see her leg crash into the side of his face.

She grabbed his kimono as he stumbled back and flipped him over her shoulder into the sand. Her feet were lifted into the air so she was doing a handstand on his chest and she blasted chakra out of her hands sending her spiraling into the air and drilling him deeper into the sand. At the peak of her launch, she raised her arms high into the air as she pushed so much chakra into her hands they started to burn. She swung them down and a tidal wave of chakra cascaded down toward her father.

The sand exploded as Hiashi's chakra rushed up and negated her attack. Hinata landed on the ground in a crouch as she panted heavily. That attack had burned up a great deal of chakra and as her father stood up calmly and wiped the blood away from his chin, she realized just how much further she had to take this… and how much farther he was as well. She wasn't so foolish as to think he had been handling this to his fullest potential. No, she knew that he still held back some of the most secret of the Hyuga's techniques. The kind only the head learned. Yet from the look on his face, she could tell they were not going to be a secret any longer. Despite the dread she felt at facing them down, a sense of pride beat in her chest. At no time in the history of the clan had those techniques ever been needed in battle.

"Hinata," Hiashi said as he walked toward her. "I recognize your strength, but this match is over. You are my equal and would possibly be even capable of defeating me if I were not head of this clan."

Her eyes widened as sharp electric blue chakra surrounded his hands. He brought them up slowly and a trail of energy seemed to follow his movements. His eyes looked down at his hands almost sadly before staring back at her.

"Never before have these techniques been used. You have become the strongest opponent the clan has ever faced. I pray that knowledge gives you peace in you passage to your next life."

She stared in barely disguised awe. Manifesting chakra for a Hyuga was a simple matter. As evident of both her father's and her techniques, it was the basis for their style. They didn't use chakra to shape elements. Instead, they launched chakra directly. It was something only the strongest of their clan could do, but it was still what they prided themselves on. She'd never said anything, but in essence, Naruto's Rasengan was an advanced form of Hyuga principles. However, what her father was using now was different. It was chakra, but so potent it seemed like it was almost something entirely different.

She was shaken from her thoughts as the air seemed to crackle around his hands and he cupped them together. They lashed out quickly and beam of blue light shot out and pierced her in the stomach. She coughed up blood as the beam sent her skidding across the sand. Her hand clutched her stomach as her mouth hung open in a silent scream. She couldn't breath and was in such blinding pain she could barely think. How had the technique been so fast she couldn't even react? Perhaps a better question was how could she defend against something like that?

She shakily rolled onto her knees as one terrifying thought echoed in her mind. He had held back for some reason. If he hadn't she would have been utterly destroyed. Destroyed… it was the most fitting word for the outcome. She staggered up onto her feet and stared at him. Her shoulders were slumped forward and she struggled to remain standing. She could nearly taste the sheer horror the crowd felt.

"Hinata stand down… please." Hiashi said as he strode forward. "The reason why the clan head is always the strongest is because of this."

She lashed out with a palm and he knocked it aside with his charged hand. She struck again and again, but quickly realized that he barely needed to block her. The trail of chakra left behind by his hands was a solid barrier. He slapped her hard with his chakra infused hand and she literally felt her brain rattling within her skull as she fell roughly into the sand. The only thing that was keeping her alive now was that

she had been pushing her own chakra through her system as some makeshift last form of defense. It was barely working and draining her already depleted reserves drastically.

"Cease struggling, have you not realized that I hold the epitome of our goals in my hands? These techniques have no name. They are referred to as the shield and spear of the clan. The true ultimate defense and attack. You cannot win."

She forced herself to stand and glared up at him without a shred of fear or submission. He gasped and she glanced down at the sand where two Byakugan styled contacts lay in the pearl colored sand.

"What did you do?" His voice came out of a gasp like he had just witnessed her mutilating herself.

Two lavender pupils stared at him. It had been her hope that she would not have had to reveal this. The penultimate goal of her training had been a secret from everyone, and even now was only half way to completion. She truly did not wish to explain it until she was completely sure she had succeeded.

"What I had to."

Her breathing steadied and she leapt forward with a cry. The clan needed her to win. Her family needed her. Chakra roared to life around her hands and she unleashed a near invisible barrage of strikes. Fingernails chipped, and bones cracked, but she continued to increase the ferocity of her attacks. Hiashi was forced to step back from her onslaught even with his incredible technique. He scowled and brought his hands up in front of him as the chakra formed a dense shield.

Hinata let her left palm relax and a soothing green healing chakra slowly emanated from it as the blue chakra in her right hand extended and formed something that looked like a shining blade. Left gripped right and she stabbed forward. The techniques met and everything went still… until the very tip of her chakra sword pierced

the defensive barrier… followed by a little more. The shield broke apart.

Hiashi grimaced as he anticipated the sharp pain of something piercing his heart. It never came. He looked down in shock as a gentle and bloody palm pressed itself lightly over his heart. He stared at his daughter in amazement as she closed her eyes and gave him a tired and pain filled smile.

"I win Dad."

The ring fell silent and the wind died down. A range of emotions played across Hiashi's face before a defeated smile crept up on his face.

"Yes, yes you do."

A shadow fell over the both of them as the Elder flew through the air and fury blazed in his pale eyes. Hinata didn't have the strength to move and could only watch as a deadly hand clawed toward her. Yet, her smile never left her face as a familiar orange blur caught the hand in mid-strike.

Author's Notes:

Thought I'd get it up early so that it would be up today. I hope the fight was worth the wait and that you are starting to understand Sai and Sakura's thought processes. Anyway, read and review. Also, in the spirit of Halloween, a special jack-o-lantern page is up on the main site. There are several custom anime/video game pumpkins.

See you next week.

Drizzle

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 7:

Naruto had never stopped smiling once Hinata's fight with her father had started. Sure, he enjoyed a good fight as well as any ninja, and this was far beyond a good fight. However, the real reason he couldn't stop smiling was because it was Hinata fighting. It amazed him to see just how devastating she had become. In just three years, she had most likely grown more than even he had, which was no small feat. He was also becoming aware of just how attractive that made her… something their month of working together had only encouraged.

They had spent a great deal of time speaking with each other leading up to this day. A great deal of it was training, but other times when they were resting, they would just talk about meaningless things. Conversations were far from deep and little history was revealed, but they were slowly beginning to understand each others quirks. It was enjoyable, so much so, that he almost preferred it to the training… almost. He couldn't completely believe how easy it was to lose track of time, or how simple it was that they clicked. Most of the time, he tried to ignore his thoughts because he really wasn't sure what conclusion he was trying to come up with… and intense thinking still made his head hurt.

His thoughts were snapped back to the match when he felt a chill in the air. He winced as her father revealed some crazy technique and fired a beam that caught Hinata dead on. His protective nature kicked in and he wrestled with himself to remain rooted to where he sat. This was her fight, and regardless of the outcome, he would not

disrespect her by interrupting it. It was something Jiraiya had beaten into him, even though he didn't always agree with it. A ninja had their beliefs, and sometimes dying for ones beliefs was more important than living because you couldn't follow through with them. Naruto hadn't agreed with that for years, but as he grew older, he began to understand it a little when he finally looked at himself. He wouldn't give up his beliefs even in the face of death. To ask someone else to do so would be one of the worst insults he could do.

He absently rubbed Hanabi's back as she shook and watched the fight with terrified eyes. He frowned as he glanced down at her. The poor girl must be totally distraught watching as her father and sister essentially tried to kill each other with everything they had. He focused his attention back on the fight. Well… Hinata was still holding back a little. She still had some things hidden up her sleeve, although they were untested. Quite frankly, they were currently as dangerous to her as anyone until she completed them. But once she did… he knew he wouldn't have a choice, but to use his chakra cloak.

A grin appeared on his face as he saw her chakra sword form and pierce the strange shield. His excitement bubbled when her victory became clear, and he was ecstatic when he saw the old bastard dart forward in a sneak attack. Finally, he'd get to have some fun.

Naruto zipped forward as Shino jumped up and summoned his insects. However, Naruto had caught the old man's hand and stopped the attack before the bug user had even begun.

"I was waiting for you to get off your wrinkled butt and do something," Naruto said with a feral grin. "I was getting bored."

"Get your hand off of me you demon bra-."

The Elder's words were cut short as Hinata's fist caught him square under the jaw and sent him spiraling backwards. Naruto looked back with a blinding smile and gave her a quick nod before taking off towards the fallen Elder as the old man's supporters started pouring

out into the ring. He didn't care. There weren't enough to slow him down, especially with Shino right behind him. However, he stopped in his tracks as a column of fire reigned down from the sky between him and the Elder. He clenched his teeth in annoyance as ten masked members appeared in the front lines. It took a moment, but he realized that they were Root. Why would those bastards be here? They didn't even take a crap without… his grin slowly crept up again. So Danzo had a hand in this huh?

"Fools all of you!" The Elder said as he pushed himself up onto his feet. "Did you think I was so foolish as to not have a back up plan in case of the girl's victory?"

"Geez, you seem a lot less composed than the usual Hyuga stick in the mud," Naruto said as he scratched the back of his head. "It's kind of refreshing actually."

"Yes, I agree demon brat that it is improper for me to be behaving in such a manner. However, I will grant myself an exception this one time."

"Father what is the meaning of this?" Hiashi asked as he took a step forward.

"I am ensuring this clan's place in Konoha's future." The Elder brushed the sand from his kimono and leveled a glare at his son. "The clan has grown weak under your leadership my son. The soft spot you developed for the branch after your brother's death has made you far too lenient with the inferior of our blood. I will resume leadership of this clan and personally groom the next in line to be a proper leader."

"I will not allow this."

"You do not have a choice my son. I will spare you and your youngest daughter in hopes, that in time, you will come to appreciate what I am doing. However, your oldest will be dealt with for her treasonous actions."

"Like hell old man," Naruto said.

"And what do you think you are capable of demon? I have personally trained my guard and with ten of Root's members, we are an impressive fighting force. The main family would not dare to cross me and any assistance you could gain from the branch will be dealt with by a mere hand sign. It is only you and the Aburame that are able to protect the exhausted girl."

Naruto fought his gut reaction to boast his confidence. This was a chance to dig up dirt on the war monger. He couldn't let it go to waste.

"How much do you know about Danzo?"

The Elder let out a chilling smirk. It was the kind that spoke volumes without saying a word. The kind that seemed like a self-fulfilling prophesy.

"Enough to know that those that side with him will have a strong future, that Konoha will have a strong future." The smirk faded into a disgusted sneer. "Now if you have nothing left to say, I will have you put down like you should have been all those years ago when you were still a little baby demon."

Naruto winced as he felt Hinata's killing intent skyrocket. He considered himself strong, but he was honestly terrified of her anger in the extremely rare cases that he had witnessed it. Her emotions were so palpable he momentarily considered that she could still take out every opponent here, even in her condition. He shook it off and narrowed his eyes while giving a toothy grin.

"Yeah, I've got one thing left to say. Are you really so stupid that you thought we wouldn't have a plan in case you decided to become the village idiot?"

A blur of green launched over the wall to his right and hurtled straight towards the mass of enemies. Black like tendrils raced through

blades of grace behind the Elder's minions and Naruto relaxed his guard.

"Dynamic Entry!"

Lee side kicked three of the Root members and forced their bodies into a self-made crater. The seven remaining members let out strangled cries as spear like shadows burst through their chests. The cries crumbled into gurgles until they collapsed. The shadows disappeared as quickly as they had come. Shikamaru walked around from behind a Sakura tree in the far corner and shoved his hands into his pockets. The Elder's followers circled their master, but Neji leapt down and struck out rapidly. Over half of the minions dropped to the ground before they realized he was there.

The Elder whirled around angrily. He lifted his hands up in the activation seal. Neji just smirked.

"I am afraid that will no longer restrain me Elder-sama."

Shock registered on the old man's face, but it quickly turned to rage as he saw Lee charge again and Shino's swarms move in for the kill.

"Damn you." The Elder watched the last of his supporters fall. "Damn every last one of you! Do you have any idea as to what you have ruined?"

"Your crazy schemes?" Naruto asked.

"I was going to raise this clan up to its original prominence. It was guaranteed when the new order came into place. Now… now it will crumble under the massive perversion you all so desire." The Elder staggered backwards and unsheathed the Tanto from the closest Root member he could find. "I will not wait to see it come to pass!"

A slick cutting sound rang through the air and the Elder fell back as blood sprayed from his neck. Naruto cringed as much of the pristine sand was turned sticky and red. He pitied the person responsible for

cleaning up that mess. He turned back to Hinata who seemed deeply saddened as she stared at the fallen form of her grandfather. He had no doubt seeing it was difficult for her. Even with all the crap they had put her through, she still considered them family. It hurt when family was lost.

Shikamaru trudged up as he stepped around the bodies. He shook his head and mumbled some incoherent complaints as Naruto moved over to him and the Hyuga filled the battlefield around Hinata.

"While it's troublesome, I'll go alert the Anbu of what went down and get them over here to clean up. Some of the Elder's supporters may have some useful information in regards to what he was insinuating."

"Yosh, I shall come along as well. Let us race to see who may reach first!"

"Too troublesome."

Naruto chuckled as they bounded over the far wall. Shikamaru apparently not willing to let Lee get too far ahead of him. He turned back to the gathering and Shino made his way to his side. Neji and Hanabi pushed their way up close to Hiashi and Hinata. The serious mood had returned as the father looked down at his daughter.

"You are now head of the clan Hinata, but you have also broken one of our most scared laws in releasing Neji, and I presume the rest of the branch. You know what comes next."

"Yes, but first I will put into place new decrees as per my rights as head of this clan."

Hiashi nodded.

"What is it that you declare?"

"First, the caged bird seal is forbidden from use. Second, the family will no longer be divided and truly become a family." The crowd of

Hyuga burst out into a large cheer that surprised Naruto with its ferocity. Who knew the reserved clansmen had it in them. They quickly became silent when Hiashi raised his hand. "Third, the clan will become more open minded about its traditions and style. Learn and continue to grow, and never fall into the trap that nothing can be improved upon."

"It will be as you wish Hinata," Hiashi said with a bow.

"Finally, I name Neji-nisan as my replacement!"

Gasps and murmurs broke out through the crowd, and even Neji himself seemed taken back by the announcement. A puzzled look came up on Naruto's face. Was this what they were talking about several weeks ago?

"Hinata-sama?"

"Neji, you are the strongest Hyuga after my father and me. With him as your teacher and advisor, you will become a truly wonderful clan head. More importantly, you have seen the worst parts of this clan so you know where things need to change."

The genius bowed his head in gratitude.

"I… thank you Hinata-sama, I will give everything that I have to achieve your expectations."

"I know you will. Now Neji… you know what must be done."

Neji looked up sadly and nodded. He took a deep shuddering breath and forced himself to become stern.

"Hinata Hyuga, you have broken the Hyuga laws that were meant to be unbreakable. Even as head of the clan, such acts are considered acts of treason."

Naruto growled and went to speak up, but Shino put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. The blonde frowned, but remained

where he was and listened as Neji continued.

"The punishment recommended is death. However, you are also the savior of this clan- no this family and as such you will have your life. Hinata, as head of the Hyuga clan, I strip you of your family name, and from this moment on, exile you from the clan."

Hinata forced herself to smile and nodded in agreement before she turned and started to walk out. Naruto saw the hidden tears in the corner of her eyes and he felt his heart break. He didn't understand why they were doing what they were, but Hinata obviously did and seemed to have known it would end like this. He didn't like it, but figured causing a scene right now would only make it harder on her.

She walked into the hall towards the exit and disappeared into the darkened corridor. He pushed himself around the gossiping clan and ran forward. He didn't want to leave her alone, but by the time he got there, no trace of her was left.

Hinata had vanished.

Danzo watched as ten tattoos vanished from his left forearm. His face remained emotionless, although his eye cracked open a sliver. Those were the numbers assigned to the Hyuga Elder. The weakest members of his Root. It would appear that the power hungry old fool had failed. No matter, it merely expedited the old Hyuga's assured death. However, Danzo could not help but feel as if the Nine Tails was involved with this. The bothersome child was quickly becoming an annoyance. He turned over to his left.

"Activate recruit cell D. Bring the ten survivors to me once their battle is finished."

"Yes Sir."

The man faded into the shadows and another agent took his place as Danzo's guard. The bandaged man's grip tightened

unconsciously on his cane. First Sai, then the sealing of the Uchiha, and now the Hyuga, Naruto Uzumaki was fast becoming something that could no longer be overlooked.

Naruto stared absently at the wooden floor of the Hokage's office. He had looked around briefly for Hinata, but she must have gone into hiding. It hadn't helped that his search had been interrupted by a squad of Anbu. His little group had been escorted to the Hokage Tower and herded into Tsunade's office. It was the last place he wanted to be. Hinata had been there for him after Sasuke. He should return the favor. No… he wanted to be there for her even if she hadn't needed to have been there for him. She had become one of his closest friends over this past month, and he firmly believed friends were there for each other.

"Naruto Uzumaki are you listening?" Tsunade snapped.

He jumped in surprise and looked at her before mumbling a half coherent apology.

"Would you care to explain why you four and our missing ex-heiress just executed a coup against Konoha's most powerful clan?"

"A what?"

"A forced take over Naruto." Shikamaru said as he leaned against a nearby wall.

Naruto blinked before he scowled at his leader.

"We didn't take over the clan, we just saved it!"

"It was still done by force, and had it failed, I would have had no choice, but to execute all of those involved. Technically, if the clan were to request it, I still would."

"Well I guess it's a good thing we didn't fail then, and the rest of them are extremely grateful!"

"That's not the point!" Tsunade stood up and slammed her palms on her desk. "You attacked a clan! Even though I assume Hinata was the primary instigator, you as ninja should not have been anywhere near clan business."

"Hokage-sama, we would not ignore our friends in need," Lee said. His expression surprisingly serious. "There was truly no other way for this to occur and for that we are sorry."

"Sorry is not good enough. The public holds the clans in high esteem. Do you have any idea what the potential backlash could be?" She cast a glare directly at Naruto. "Especially you, you have finally started winning the approval of the villagers. A stunt like this could set you back years."

"And if it means I would have had to abandon one of my friends, I'd rather have the villagers hate me for the rest of my life."

Tsunade sat down slowly with a sigh and looked over each ninja carefully.

"Anbu have reported that you encountered Root members, and that the Hyuga Elder insinuated Danzo was plotting something. Because of this, as far as everyone outside this room is concerned, I tasked you with an S-class highly classified mission to uncover and prevent a potential village threat. Are we clear?"

"Yes Hokage-sama, you are very gracious," Lee said with a small bow as Shikamaru and Shino nodded in agreement.

"The hell I am. Your little group has proven how… problematic it can be." Naruto could have sworn she was trying to fight back a smirk. "As of today, I am turning you five into a special team directly under my control. I might as well put your talents to use somewhere besides dethroning clan leaders."

"What of our current teams Tsunade-sama?" Shino asked.

"They will be redistributed."

"Redistributed?"

"Quite frankly, this has been needed for some time. Team Kakashi has been rendered unfixable, and with Neji being made clan head, he will be taken off the active duty roster. That effectively annihilates two teams and leaves me with floating ninja. Given the super specialized nature of the current teams, a new ninja will not easily find a place. It would be easier and more beneficial to reform the teams in accordance with your current abilities and mission necessities."

Naruto glanced around the room. No one seemed happy about the announcement. He himself was irritated by it greatly. Her direct dismissal of Team Seven stung. It felt like he was abandoning his team. She wave her hand at them.

"We will discuss this more tomorrow. You are dismissed. Naruto, I want you to stay briefly."

The others filed out silently, each one deep in thought. The door shut with a click and Naruto frowned as he stared at Tsunade.

"Wipe that look off your face brat."

"I don't like this."

"Tough."

"How can you just throw my team away like that. After everything we've been through and fought for, you just ended it like that!"

"Naruto, what team?"

Naruto's mouth hung open slightly as his mind tried to register what she had just said. The words were spoken so simple and softly, but

they cut through his anger like the cold.

"You have a jonin instructor who has been assigned permanent protection detail for your substitute member. Sasuke Uchiha turned traitor and tried to kill you three times. Sakura is often needed at the hospital or on another team due to shortage of medics. It is time to face the reality that Team Seven, and by extension Team Kakashi, is far beyond the point of repair."

"How do we now that if we can't even try?"

"So I should allow your broken team even more years and opportunities to try and rebuild itself? That I should ignore the fact, that there is another team that could prove one hundred times more beneficial to Konoha?"

Naruto looked at the ground angrily, but remained silent. He couldn't argue with her. He wanted to more than anything, but as his mind repeated her words the more it made sense… logically anyway.

"Shikamaru is one of the brightest minds in the village and will one day surpass his father as a strategist. You and Lee will provide motivation and offset his laziness. Shino is a long range fighter and calm enough to neutralize Lee and your hyperactivity. Hinata can provide medical assistance and seems to be excellent at keeping you in line. Coupled with the fact that you, Hinata, and Lee are quickly becoming some of the most powerful ninjas in the village it makes it nearly impossible to say no to such a team."

"I- I guess I can see your point."

She smiled sadly at him and leaned towards him.

"Naruto, I speak from experience in this. Don't grip the past so tightly that you are unable to move towards the future. Never giving up on someone is admirable, but not if it prevents you from helping someone right in front of you." She leaned back in her chair. "Now get out of here. There is a young Hyuga girl out there somewhere

who needs a friend right now, and I suspect you are the only one who could fill that role.

Naruto's frown disappeared and he jumped up. He gave a quick nod and dove out the window as he summoned several hundred Kage Bunshin. His concern for Hinata quickly overcame his frustrations about the current situation.

"Damn that kid, he really knows how to mix things up," Jiraiya said as he appeared from the opposite window Naruto had left from. "Nice job staying all authoritive, I'm surprised you weren't throwing a party for what they did."

"You know I can't appear to have an opinion on clan matters. However, their actions should help revive a clan that was stagnant and on the verge of imploding. As an added bonus, we gained even more information on Danzo."

Jiraiya sat down on the windowsill with a knowing smile.

"So you think you'll have enough to take the old warmonger down?"

"I don't know yet." She stood and walked over toward the window as the sun started to set. The sun casting an orange glow out across the village. "Thank you for coming back, it will help in our discussion with him."

"No problem, I am his godfather after all."

"How do you think he will take it?"

"It's tough to say. I think some things he will take well. Others… well he may not take as well. Regardless, we need to tell him everything… even the most painful truths."

Tsunade sighed and her eyes turned downcast.

"I pray that we're doing the right thing."

Naruto trudged up the stairs to his apartment wearily. It was well past midnight and he hadn't found Hinata. She had hid well, to the point where he was beginning to wonder if she had left the village. He shook his head at that thought, that wasn't like her. His stomach growled hungrily and he patted it soothingly. It was the reason why he had decided to take a break. The only meal he had all day was a quick breakfast. He just needed a quick bite to eat and he'd get back out searching for her. He wouldn't stop until he found her.

He reached the top of the stairs and his eyes widened. Hinata sat in front of his door with her head in her arms and her knees pulled up against her. He sighed in relief and ran over.

"Hinata! I've been looking everywhere for you. Are you okay?" He winced at the question. Of course she wasn't okay. "I mean… well you know."

She looked up at him with a weak smile. Her eyes were red and he knew she must have been struggling not to cry since she left the compound. He didn't wait for her to say anything. He grabbed her arm and pulled her up while he unlocked his door and pushed it open.

"Have you eaten?"

She shook her head no.

"Well neither have I." He pulled her inside and kicked the door shut.

He inwardly cringed as he clicked the lights on. Normally, his apartment didn't bother him, but after seeing how clean her home was he felt a little self-conscious about the state of his living room. He'd have to clean it up tomorrow.

"Sorry about the mess. I'll clean it in the morning. What do you want for… Hinata?"

She stared at the ground and her shoulders shook slightly as she tried to keep everything bottled up. He walked over slowly and placed a hand on her shoulder. He looked down at her sadly and gently pulled her into a hug. It felt awkward for him at first, since he had only seen hugs and never actively experienced one. She started to tremble worse and he felt warm tears start to dampen his chest as her hands came up and clutched at his jacket. He let his instincts take over and he pulled her in tighter.

"It's okay Hinata. I'm here, so don't hold it back anymore."

He wasn't sure if it was her limit or his words, but whatever it was it worked. She buried her face into his chest and sobbed.

Author's Notes:

Sorry for the delay, Saturday I was at an all day tournament on two hours of sleep and then I had to work that night. Also, the main reason is my laptop got hit hard with a virus. Three anti-virus software, four anti-spyware, and a system restore later, it is back up to perfect condition. I couldn't access any of the new Naruto, Breathe, or Echoes chapters unfortunately until two hours ago. Anyway, thank you for you patience and I hope this was worth the wait. I know it is a little short, but I will still be updating Saturday, and honestly, this was a perfect spot to end it before the next section.

On another note, I know there are some questions many have in the reviews. I will try to answer many of the more common ones without giving away any spoilers.

So Read and Review, and thanks again for you patience.

See you Saturday.

Rain

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Naruto Asunder

Chapter 8:

Itachi had done many things in his time in the world. He'd succeeded and moved through Konoha's ranks at an impressively young age. He was one of the few to have achieved the infamous Mangekyo Sharingan. His entire clan had fallen by his hands, and all, but the strongest of ninja, feared him. However, one thing he had never done, nor had any intention of doing, was squirm. Yet, standing before the combined force of Pain and Madara, he was beginning to think squirming was not so unreasonable.

"Why did you let the Nine Tails escape Itachi?" Pain asked. The piercings along his nose shimmered in the candle light and highlighted the fear inducing Rinnegan.

"I was concerned about the success of the mission," Itachi said. He could swear that Madara was frowning beneath that horrid orange mask of his.

"The Nine Tails was injured and you had Kisame with you."

"I had also just killed Orochimaru, which consumed a great deal of chakra. Kakashi Hatake was also with them and more than capable of fighting."

"I do not care for your excuses."

"I apologize Leader-sama."

"Save your apologies, you are to retrieve the Nine Tails immediately. Hidan and Kakuzu will meet you and Kisame in route. You are dismissed."

Itachi gave a nod and turned away as his cloak swirled around them. His face was the same calm emotionless façade as it had always been, but inside his head, his mind was racing. How could he keep the Jinchuriki out of Akatsuki? Dealing with Kisame was simple, but the other two would make his mission that much harder. However, he had wanted to go to Konoha and make Danzo realize his mistakes. Perhaps fate had just been on his side for a change.

He paused as Madara's familiar vile chakra swirled behind him before settling.

"I trust your thoughts are on how you will make my plans a success Itachi," Madara's muffled voice said through the mask.

"Of course."

"I am not so sure. Could you perhaps be going to settle a score with our old friend Danzo?"

Itachi showed no outward displays of surprise or annoyance. Although, inside his mind was calculating an excuse. It was tiring always calculating, but completely necessary to his survival. Every second he lived there was a threat. Every action he took had to be measured and weighed. It was exhausting.

"I am doing as I am required. Now if you'll excuse me."

The explosion of killing intent and chakra almost sent Itachi to his knees. He kept his breathing even as his master's anger intensified. Madara's lone Sharingan barred down on him menacingly.

"You had best keep in mind who you are speaking to boy!"

Itachi gave an apologetic nod and quickly continued on his way. The malevolent chakra never dissipating.

"Baa-chan wants to speak with me for a little bit today. Are you going to be okay until I get back Hinata?" Naruto asked as he set a plate of eggs down in front of her.

He had left early in the morning to go to the store and get something besides the ramen he had stocked. Eggs had been the only thing he felt comfortable with attempting to cook, and he was quite happy with how they turned out. Hinata gave a forced smile of thanks before looking down and poking at it with her chopsticks.

Naruto frowned. She had finally stopped openly crying after an hour of them standing in the middle of the room. He had been so terrified of doing something to further upset her he had stayed frozen while trying to hug as much comfort as he could into her. Eventually, she calmed down enough he'd coaxed her to go to sleep. He tucked her into his bed and pulled up a chair to keep watch on her through the night. The tears had never stopped flowing from her eyes during her restless slumber.

"Thank you Naruto-kun for everything." She never looked up from her plate.

His smile blazed to life and he scratched the back of his head.

"No problem Hinata."

"I assume Tsunade-sama is furious."

"No way, well she wasn't happy, but she got over it. Besides, who cares what the old hag has to say."

The tense silence returned to the kitchen. Naruto went back to making some eggs for himself as his guest nibbled at her food.

"I'll make sure I am out of your way after breakfast Naruto-kun. I don't want to intrude upon you more than I already have."

He whirled around and was by her side so fast his Shunshin would have struggled to keep up with him. She jumped slightly as he leaned in close. His eyes alive with alarm.

"Don't ever think that Hinata. You are more than welcome to stay here."

"But I've already asked so much of you-."

"So what? It's not anything I wouldn't have offered to do anyways. Besides, I'm happy I can help you."

"But-."

"Nope, I don't want to hear it. In fact, I won't let you leave here."

A light pink blush crept up on her cheeks.

"What?"

"You're moving in with me. I always enjoy having friends over, and you're probably my closest one." A large grin stretched across his face. "Besides, after what happened yesterday, I bet that old bastard Danzo is pissed at us. We need to watch each others' backs and I can't think of anyone I'd rather have than you."

She looked back down at her plate and fresh tears started to drip on her eggs. He blinked before a panicked expression washed over his features. He waved his hands nervously in front of him.

"Oh man did I make you cry? I'm sorry Hinata, I didn't mean to!"

She shook her head and looked up at him with a happy smile, but her eyes remained tightly closed.

"No Naruto-kun, I'm just really happy to have met you."

Sakura rubbed her tired emerald eyes and looked up at the clock in the corner of the library. It was morning already? She groaned and slammed her head against the book that was open on the table. Her hospital shift started in an hour and she was exhausted. With a weary sigh, she started to pack up the pile of books that lay scattered out on the table. As tired as she was, a small flicker of happiness had come to life.

It had taken some prying and research, but she had found out that the seal Naruto placed on Sasuke would work as it was supposed to. Once Tsunade-shisho had explained it fully, Sakura was blown away at how ingenious her teammate had been and was deeply grateful that he had found a way around Sasuke's assured execution. But, the point that she still had not agreed with, even after a great deal of arguing with her teacher, was that Sasuke would have to emerge on his own. It was her firm belief that without his friends, the last Uchiha would only slip further into the darkness. If that evil inside him was really as potent as described, then Sasuke would need help.

She placed the books back up on their respective shelves and made her way out of the library. Last night had proved beneficial, to the point she had to make only a few preparations. Naruto's seal was impressive and nearly perfect, except for one flaw. It did not prevent someone from adding another seal to the body. Naruto's seal would remain inactive as long as no one tried to gather any form of genetic material or tamper with the seal. It allowed for a small loophole that she was determined to exploit.

The one book that remained in her hands was discreetly tucked into her knapsack. A book on mind control seals. In theory, if she could alter Sasuke's state of mind to a positive loyal one, Naruto's seal would break and the old loyal Sasuke they loved would return. Everything would go back to the way it was and Team Seven would be reunited.

She was sure of it.

Sweat dripped off the two bodies as they clashed against each other repeatedly. Ragged breaths mingled as the two's limbs tangled amongst themselves. It intensified quickly until in the moment of climax, Naruto was smashed face first into the dusty ground. He rolled onto his back and grabbed his nose as it started to bleed. Lee grinned down apologetically as Naruto glared up at him.

"I apologize Naruto-kun. I am still attempting to perfect using my opponents force against them." Lee bowed quickly then looked up with a blaring smile. "But you can not doubt how effective it is."

Naruto could only grunt as he picked himself up and Hinata wandered over.

"That was an impressive sparring match, Naruto-kun. It was amazing how you managed to keep up with Lee, despite never witnessing a fighting method like that before." She turned to Lee. "And Lee-san, you changed between several fighting arts that I've never witnessed. You have really changed."

Lee offered and embarrassed smile and helped Naruto off the ground.

"Thank you very much Hinata-san. Are you prepared for our match now?"

"I'll stretch for a second and give you small break."

She turned around and walked to the center of the field as she stretched her arms over her head. Naruto gave a quick glance at her, but looked away quickly. He had been increasingly aware of Hinata over the past month. Every movement or action she made, he caught himself watching her. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why. It was just like she demanded his attention without even trying. He still could not understand why he never noticed her before. However, now he was trying to figure why he was noticing her so much. It didn't help that he had been worried about her all morning even though she had seemed happier after breakfast.

"I see you are having many youthful thoughts of Hinata-san, Naruto-kun." Lee whispered.

Naruto was snapped from his thoughts and waved his arms in front of him in denial.

"No, no, no, no it is nothing like that."

"So then you do find Hinata-san attractive."

"What? Of course I do! I mean, come on, who wouldn't? She's got to be the most beautiful girl in the village." He paused when he thought he heard an odd squeak and Hinata stumbled briefly. Did she step on a mouse? He shook his head and focused back on Lee. "But, that's not what I was thinking about!"

"Yet, you were staring at her."

Naruto's mouth flopped open and closed like a fish out of water for a moment before he turned up his nose and stomped away.

"Don't you have a match to get to?"

Lee gave a nod and ran over to Hinata, and if Naruto didn't know any better, he would have sworn the spandex clad ninja had a sly smile on his face. He shook his head and made sure to get some distance from them, both for his safety and theirs.

With a sigh, he settled into a loose stance and reached his hand out behind him, palm up. He pushed the chakra easily into his hand and the orb of chakra took shape. He closed his eyes and focused on the spinning ball. The wind couldn't be forced into the shape, just like trying to grab the wind was futile. Jiraiya had stated repeatedly that wind based chakra couldn't be tamed, only guided. A small frown appeared on his face as he tried to push wind element into the sphere and it began to destabilize. He stopped the wind element immediately.

He didn't want to use a clone. They were an extra step in battle, and while at times using the clones support could prove useful, he shouldn't be reliant upon it. He tried to push and mix again and the same result occurred. With a slow breath, he relaxed and let the chakra dissipate. Suddenly, he felt it happen. Stray elements of his dissipating wind chakra were sucked into the fading sphere. His brow furrowed. He quickly reformed the orb and released some more of the element into the area around it. To his amazement, the Rasengan began to absorb it. In a matter of moments, the spiraling sphere was charged with the wind and a soft whistling sound emanated from it.

His right eye cracked open, as if looking at it would cause it to explode. Slowly, he opened both eyes and brought the sphere in front of him. It was far brighter than a regular Rasengan. It spun faster too. Currently, it wasn't as powerful as when he used a clone, but there was much less chakra. Still, he wouldn't want to be hit with it.

The ground shook as Hinata and Lee clashed and Naruto winced as the sphere started to become unstable.

"Crap!"

He flung it high into the sky and hit the ground with his hands over his head. The orb shimmered for a moment before it exploded in the air. It felt like a massive wind storm tore across the field and anything within ten feet of it, like the tree tops, were sliced to ribbons. Branches and leaves fell down around him and he slowly cracked an eye open. He lifted his head slowly and surveyed the damage done… oops. He glanced over to his left. Hinata and Lee had been frozen in mid-strike and stared at him in awe.

Naruto stood and a nervous smile stretched across his face while he scratched the back of his head.

"I got it working!"

Itachi sat quietly in the shade the tree he was leaning against provided. He allowed himself a moment of peace as a gentle breeze caressed the branches and caused the lush leaves to dance. It was calming and allowed him to focus. Something had been bothering him for the past few weeks since he killed Orochimaru. The snake had gone down easily, but that wasn't what had him wracking his mind. He had, in his free moments, gone over the battle repeatedly, and it was… frustrating that he could not put his ingenious finger on it. Noticing the smallest of facts was something he was known for.

"What the hell is taking those two so long?" Kisame asked as he paced back and forth. "We were supposed to meet up over five hours ago."

"Kakuzu was no doubt distracted by some type of bounty."

"If that's the case I'll skin that rag doll alive."

Itachi remained silent and went back to contemplating what had him so concerned with that day.

"I'm surprised you aren't rushing to get the Nine Tails. Leader was pretty pissed."

Itachi tried to ignore him.

"So you going to take a look at your kid brother when we get there?"

Itachi's eyes snapped open and he was on his feet in a flash.

"We're going."

"Why the sudden rush."

"I will explain later."

"Whatever you say. I was tired of waiting anyway."

They took to the trees and Itachi kept his eyes focused ahead. The mention of his brother had given him an epiphany. When he had seen Sasuke carried away after his defeat, he had absently noticed something. The curse seal on his neck had not disappeared entirely.

Orochimaru was alive.

Sakura slipped into Sasuke Uchiha's room and quickly locked the door behind her. She was a regular visitor so the guard didn't think twice about letting her in. It disgusted her that she had to sneak behind peoples backs like some kind of enemy ninja. However, she couldn't blame them or anyone really. Everyone was doing what they felt was best for the village. She understood that completely and was glad that they did, but Sasuke was a special case. It was not because he was from a royal bloodline, a teammate, or even her long time crush. She had to save him from himself because of that night.

When he had left, she would have gone with him. It was stupid and childish, but her naïve crush on the boy had convinced her it was the right choice. She wasn't sure of her feelings now. A part of her asked what if? Would things be different if he became loyal? She wasn't so foolish as to think they would ride off into the sunset, and she wasn't doing this for her own selfish reasons. She was doing this because of a promise she made to him.

She had promised to stay with him so that he would never have to be alone and unhappy. He had thanked her and saved her from herself. Through the years, she had discovered that what she said was her promise of a lifetime. Naruto had delivered on his promise to the best of his abilities and even bypassed an impossible situation. Once she realized exactly what he had done, he had gained her eternal thanks. The blonde idiot truly was one of a kind and one of her dearest friends, even if her violent outbursts stated otherwise.

She looked down at the pale and almost serene face of her one time crush. Now, it was her turn to take the lead for both her and Naruto's

sakes. She unfolded a piece of paper and gave one last look at the seal she had created. It was flawless. She was sure of it. With a steady hand, she traced the design on his forehead using an ink brush.

Thoughts of the future missions her team would have together caused a small smile to grace her lips. It would be amazing and they would be unbeatable. They would make Konoha proud, that was assured. And most importantly, Naruto would have his family together again.

She gave one last flick and the seal was complete. The ink dried instantly and her palm pressed lightly against the seal. With a small pulse of chakra, it lit up. Her emerald eyes watched intently as they searched for any sign of something wrong. A feeling of contentment arose in her chest when there wasn't any. The seal dissipated and the room returned to stillness. She waited breathlessly for any change and after a few moments he stirred.

Discreetly, she focused chakra into her fist as a precaution, but as he turned to her it dissipated almost instantly. Those same bored onyx eyes that she had become accustomed to all those years ago stared at her with a faint glimpse of amusement.

"Hello… Sakura."

Relief washed over her and she smiled happily as a lone tear crept up in her eye.

"Welcome home Sasuke-kun."

"Home." He said the word slowly as if the name was foreign and yet pleasant. With a grunt, he sat up. "I'm home."

She took a step forward and a soft squelch sounded throughout the room. Her eyes widened and drifted down to her stomach. A snake had buried its fangs deep within her belly, and as it pulled away, purple venom dripped from its fangs and melted several small spots

on the ground. She grabbed her stomach and stumbled back until she fell. Her mouth opened as if to shout or scream, but the feeling of her insides being melted, prevented her from speaking.

Sasuke hopped down of the bed.

"Ku ku ku, thank you child. I do apologize for having to use that particular snake. You see it produces more of an acid than poison. I developed it after my last encounter with your blasted master. Even someone of her caliber would have a difficult time healing someone from this, let alone herself. I imagine the pain is quite unbearable."

She could only let out a strangled gasp and clutched her stomach tighter as green chakra flickered around her palms.

"I should thank you. Naruto-kun's seal was rather impressive and kept me trapped inside this body along with Sasuke-kun. Fortunately, your additional seal worked and provided me the opportunity to steal this marvelous body away before its original host could become coherent."

She struggled to get on her knees and crawl towards the door. If she could make it that far, then Orochimaru wouldn't be able to escape. A painful spasm ripped through her body and she collapsed in a heap.

"I would refrain from struggling. It will only increase the process." He walked over and flipped her onto her back with his foot. "Perhaps, I should kill you now and save you from the agony of-."

He froze and looked puzzled for a brief moment before he clutched his head.

"Damn you boy! This is my body now so be quiet and slumber for eternity."

The black eyes flickered into the Sharingan and a grotesque pale blob emerged from the curse seal. It quickly changed into the shape

of Orochimaru's face. The snake-nin glared angrily at the body's face as a pair of furious Sharingan eyes stared back at him.

"I believe you have outlived your usefulness Orochimaru," Sasuke said as a Chidori current formed around his body.

"You will never be rid of me Sasuke-kun. I am now a part of this body."

"Not for long, with these eyes I can see every chakra saturated cell of yours in my body."

Orochimaru's gold eyes widened with shock as the current intensified to the same level as a lightning storm.

"Wait don't be-."

The current focused inward and a surge of electricity coursed through Sasuke's body. Orochimaru yelled out in pain as arks of lighting danced within him. Steadily, he lost his shape and melted back into Sasuke's body. The Uchiha collapsed onto one knee and panted heavily as the lightning ceased. He looked down and inspected himself as his frown grew.

"It appears I am not able to be completely rid of the weakling's presence." He looked down at Sakura as she looked up at him with a mixture of relief, pain, and hope.

"S-Sasu-ke." Her voice came out in quiet gasps.

He fixed his clothes where they had become disheveled from the Orochimaru growth and walked out.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise as he spotted the dead guard leaned up against the door frame. Next to the guard was a katana. It was placed in a way that made it obvious it was for him to grab. He looked around and spotted three ninja's dressed in Anbu garb dart

through the far window. A strangled cry drew his attention back to the room.

Sakura stared up at him as tears leaked from her eyes. A desperate pleading expression was plastered on her paling face. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity before he took a step towards her.

Slowly, he grasped the door handle and closed the door quietly. He turned and took off after the cloaked ninjas without ever looking back.

Naruto sat nervously in front of Tsunade's desk as Jiraiya leaned on the wall behind her. He still wasn't sure why he was here and they were having this little meeting. What he did know was that Jiraiya had etched a lot of silencing seals around the room and both of the sannin were uncomfortable, like neither one wanted to start this conversation.

"How is Hinata doing Naruto?" Tsunade asked.

"She's doing better after our training session with Lee. She'll be staying with me for awhile."

"Nice gaki."

"It's not like that pervert."

"Whatever you say my boy." The toad sage's teasing grin slowly died and the uncomfortable silence returned.

"What's going on with you two? You ask me here and then act like it's the last thing you want to do. Did I do something wrong?"

"No Naruto, it's just… we are unsure of how you will handle what we have to tell you." Tsunade leaned forward and stared at him seriously. "What we are going to talk about is something that should

not leave this room. Jiraiya and I have talked extensively about when we should have this conversation. It was left up to him to choose the time when you were ready."

"Okay?"

"Naruto, I believe you are mature enough to handle this. However, it won't be easy and I want you to be quiet until we're done talking okay?"

Naruto could only nod as he felt his mouth dry. What the hell was going on? They were acting like they were selling him to the Akatsuki or something.

"Just spit it out Ero-sennin!"

"Alright, Naruto we called you here to talk about your paren-."

The door to the office burst open and three jounin ran in frantically.

"What is the meaning of this? I left clear instructions we were not to be disturbed!"

"Hokage-sama, it is an emergency. Sasuke Uchiha has escaped and Sakura Haruno is in critical condi-."

Naruto, Tsunade, and Jiraiya sprinted out of the office so fast it nearly knocked the jounin over. They were outside in a matter of seconds and leapt into the air. Naruto's mind raced. Sakura was hurt and Sasuke escaped. What the hell happened? Had his seal failed? Was this his fault?"

"Naruto, something is wrong." Jiraiya ran up beside him. "Your seal was perfect. We're missing something?"

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Naruto, stay back when we get there. We don't know if this is a trap." Tsunade ran ahead of them and landed at the hospital entrance.

She bolted through the front doors with Jiraiya and Naruto a step behind her. They raced up the stairs and Naruto stopped as his blood ran cold. Sakura was curled up on a table. Her eyes were bloodshot and she wheezed in a desperate attempt to breathe through the pain. Shizune and three other med-nins moved about trying to figure out how to stop what was killing her.

Jiraiya grabbed him before he could run forward. Naruto twisted around and looked up at him as panic settled in his stomach. The older man looked at him grimly and shook his head. Naruto looked back at the scene before him. Tsunade was right in the fray barking questions and giving orders. Naruto's eyes remained glued on his teammate's anguished faced and time seemed to move slower as the medical team seemed to calm down. His knees almost gave out when he saw Sakura look at him and give him a pain filled smile as Tsunade shook her head.

The slug princess placed a glowing hand on Sakura's stomach and the pain appeared to lessen in the girl.

"H-Hey Naruto, come here for a minute." Sakura's voice was raspy and quivering.

He tried to rush over to her as quickly as he could, but no matter how hard he tried, his legs felt like lead weights. Each step took every ounce of will power, and every inch was like a mile. In what seemed like forever to him, he made it to her side. His eyes grew moist as she smiled at him again.

"Sakura-chan what-?"

"I messed up Naruto." She gave a weak chuckle. "I tried to release Sasuke by using a mind control seal to erase his hatred."

His face became ashen.

"Why did you do that Sakura-chan? That was too dangerous."

"I did it for selfish reasons." She winced once again, but didn't lose the smile. "I wanted us to be a team again. You and Sasuke were always so alone, I just." Tears welled up in her eyes. "I just wanted our family to be together again."

Naruto struggled to not cry openly even as Sakura did. This was his fault. His inability to save Sasuke did this.

"You're thinking too loud Naruto. This isn't your fault at all."

"But Sakura-."

"No, no I was impatient and did something I shouldn't. We all made our own choices. You do not blame yourself for this okay?"

He nodded and clenched his fists as his sadness was steadily giving way to anger. This was his mistake. He should have killed that red eyed bastard when he had the chance.

"Sakura, what happened?" Tsunade asked. "There is an unbelievably concentrated level of venom in your system."

"The seal I used released Orochimaru. Sasuke said the snake had hidden his cells in his body. Sasuke is in control of his body for now."

"Which one?" Naruto felt his fingernails lengthen and pierce the insides of his palms. "Which one did this to you?"

"Orochimaru, but… but Sasuke left me in the room. Lee showed up and brought me here."

"Sasuke left you?"

Sakura could only nod as her tears fell freely, and Naruto quickly realized that his were doing the same. She weakly reached up and

pulled him into a hug. He could feel her heartbeat slowing and her body temperature was frigid.

"Naruto, I need you to make one more promise of a life time for me okay?"

"Sure Sakura-chan, anything you want."

"I want you to be happy." She hugged him tighter. "Naruto, I want you to be happy."

His breath hitched in his chest. She had never acknowledged him as anything, but a teammate before. His personal feelings were never talked about. He knew she had been closer to him after his return, but it was unspoken. He pulled her tighter to him.

"You know Naruto. I was pretty stupid. You're going to make some girl one hell of a husband."

"Sakura-chan you aren't stupid."

Her eyes glazed over and he realized she hadn't heard what he had said.

"You've always been there protecting me and trying to make me happy. Thank you Naruto, thank you for being my friend… my best friend."

She fell silent and her eyes closed. He held her until he felt her heart stop completely, all the while praying that she would realize that he was there with her until the end. His shoulders shook as he sobbed quietly into her hair. The grief he felt was almost more than he could bear.

"I'm sorry Naruto." Tsunade placed a hand on his back. "I'm so sorry."

He sniffed and gently rested Sakura's body on the table. He brushed his tears away with his sleeve harshly and slowly removed his

headband. Tsunade blinked as he handed it over to her.

"Naruto what are you-?"

"I do not want Konoha to be associated with what I'm going to do." Two burning fox like eyes stared at her. "To that walking corpse!"

Lee blasted through the forest outside of Konoha's gates. He had removed his weights long ago in the hospital and had set a blistering pace. His eyes hardened and he increased his speed while he ignored the urge to access the first gate. His present speed was more than enough to catch the Uchiha. He had been careless in his escape and the almost glowing trail through the trees made the message clear. Sasuke had no interest in hiding and welcomed anyone who hunted him. It was a challenge Lee was more than happy to accept.

The image of a broken and terrified Sakura flashed in his mind's eye again. How could anyone do that to someone? To harm them and not even finish them off? At least a quick death was merciful, but to just abandon someone. It made his blood boil.

He had gone to the hospital to ask Sakura out to lunch, since he had heard from Naruto that she had been working around the clock. Regardless of what had happened, Naruto still kept tabs on his pink haired teammate. Lee shook his head at what was going through her mind the moments she spent alone until he had arrived. He had rounded the corner to see the Uchiha shut the door calmly and take off after Root agents.

Lee had been just a second away from giving chase when he heard an agonizing gasp. He'd opened the door and his heart had broken. Sakura had been laying there clutching her stomach and staring at the door with a look of total abandonment on her face. What happened next was a blur to him, but somehow he had grabbed her and sprinted down to a hallway full of doctors while screaming for help.

They'd kicked him out quickly and set to work in a crazed scramble to save his one time crush. However, he could tell just by seeing the worried expression on Shizune's face that there was little they could do. His body had reacted on its own after that because his mind had been distracted with the happy memories of Sakura. From their first meeting and her harsh refusal to his advances, through all of the adventures and times spent during their years as chunin, his crush had never dissolved. But, he had been content being her friend, even if they never were close. To him, just being in her presence made him happy.

He was not so foolish as to think she would ever see him for anything other than a friendly and kind ninja, but he could never shake off that lingering sense of hope that she would. She had spent more time with him than anyone excluding his team. He did not consider himself a lonely person, but the sheer amount of training he did didn't exactly allow for an active social life.

Well… he wasn't being entirely honest with himself. Perhaps, he had been a little lonely. In truth, he'd been the dead last with no friends. Eventually, he found a team that had developed a strong bond. Yet as they grew older, Neji and Tenten had grown closer to the point that sometimes he felt like a third wheel. Sakura had been his saving grace even if it had only been lunch several times a month. He could understand why Naruto was always so interested in her. She was rough around the edges, but always made things interesting and would offer a smile when he needed it most. She was his beloved cherry blossom… and now she was gone because of an arrogant and selfish traitor.

It was after that thought that he realized he was already several miles outside the village. What he felt as his mind came back to him was something he had never truly experienced. It was anger and the desire to take that anger out on what caused it. He wanted to unleash what he was feeling on Sasuke Uchiha.

Naruto would no doubt be setting out after the Uchiha as well. How the blonde would react he didn't know. His guess was any form of

attachment Naruto had for the traitor was gone… and his friend would be out for blood. However, Lee was not going to let that happen for Naruto's own sake. The death of one teammate would be almost unbearable. If he had to kill the other one… no, Naruto would not have to be faced with that.

His eyes narrowed as he saw a flash of dull white and a red crest four hundred feet ahead. He clenched his bandaged hands tightly and opened the first gate as he sprung off a tree branch. The branch exploded and the tree let out a pained groan as it started to tip. He poured on as much speed as he could, and in a matter of seconds, he leapt into the air and brought his foot forward.

He sailed towards the enemy with his leg stretched out into a kick, and a pair of blood red Sharingan turned to face him.

Naruto sprinted past the chunin guards that tried to stop him at the main gate. He had to get to Lee and stop Sasuke. This was his mistake and he'd be damned if he didn't make amends. He let the Uchiha live and he would rectify that. That bastard was going to finally realize that blind revenge would do nothing, but bring pain and suffering. Sasuke was going to die knowing he had lost everything and that his life was a waste.

Naruto shook his head and forced the Kyubi's chakra back down. No, that was not how he thought. He was angry and he was hurt, but he was not going to kill Sasuke just to satiate his anger and to watch the bastard suffer. He was going to do it because it was his responsibility to do so. It was his fault Sakura was dead and Sasuke's death wasn't going to fix that. However, it was his ideals that had prevented them from dealing with a traitor. It took a great deal of training from Jiraiya, but he learned from his mistakes.

"Naruto stop." Jiraiya ran up next to his student. "You're not thinking clearly. Don't go charging off recklessly, you know better than that."

"Lee has almost a twenty minute head start and Sasuke nearly has thirty. I won't let another friend die, and I won't let my mistake hurt the village more than it already has."

"That's fine, but you left without a team or asking me."

"It's not your fight Sensei, and I won't risk others. Don't worry. I'm not so angry that I haven't realized this forest is crawling with Danzo's Root lackeys."

"We don't know what he's planning Naruto. There are too many for you to fight off on your own and deal with the Uchiha."

Naruto looked at him with a forced grin.

"But you would be able to take out all of them easily Sensei."

"Naruto-."

"Deal with them, I'll take care of Sasuke, and I have little doubt you'll have caught up before I finish."

Jiraiya frowned as Naruto stared at him without any intention of backing down.

"Be safe brat, and make sure you do this for the right reasons."

"I will."

Author's Notes:

I'm sure I will get mixed impressions off of this chapter. I tried to stay as true to Sasuke's and Sakura's personalities as possible. Especially in Sakura's case, I wanted to focus on her tendancy to be someone with her heart in the right place, but often swayed by her emotions. And Sasuke… well, I didn't want him to be a simplistic evil bastard. I wanted to explore his detached nature from the situation. I

will explain his actions more clearly in the next chapter so please hold your opinions until then.

Okay then, now to some questions and comments.

First off thank you to everyone for your reviews. I value them highly.

The first and most common critique has been the rushing of the first few chapters. It is something I have tried to overcome as the story progresses. I also did not have a great deal of new material to add outside of canon and felt it was pointless to just reiterate. You all know the what happens.

Second question is the flashbacks and how the three main characters got to where they are. Don't worry it is coming. This also ties into why Hinata was wearing contacts and now has pupils.

Third would be wind training. Naruto is taking his time because he is trying to truly master wind element manipulation instead of a single technique. Also, unlike in shippuden, it isn't his primary focus because it isn't the only means for him to fight on even footing with everyone. I never really got how he could spend three years with a Sannin, show limited improvement, then train for a week to create a new technique, and is now an S-class fighter. I want to be a little more gradual with it.

Anyway, please read and review. I hope you enjoyed this chapter (and got a little emotional).

I'll see you next week.

Torrent

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 9:

Sasuke rapidly brought the still sheathed sword up to block Lee's kick and grunted as the force knocked him back down towards the forest floor. He flipped and landed on his feet effortlessly as he gripped the blade tightly. The sheath crumbled and fell away as his eyes glared furiously up at Lee who stood high up in the trees.

"I don't appreciate someone attacking me from behind," Sasuke said.

"It was not an attack. I wanted to get your attention."

"You are beneath my attention."

"And yet, I will crush you."

"And how do you figure that? I am an Uchiha and you can't even use chakra."

"I will show you."

Lightning coursed down Sasuke's blade as Lee blasted straight for him. He stabbed forward and Lee twisted in the air, while he caught his wrist. Sasuke summoned his Chidori Current and Lee yanked his hand back just before the ark of electricity hit it. The Uchiha swung again as Lee drifted helplessly in the air.

"Kyumon open!"

Lee seemed to blur out of existence as the second chakra gate released and the sword cut through his after image. Yet, Sasuke's eyes kept up with him the entire time. The Uchiha flipped through a few hand seals and inhaled deeply.

"Katon: Hosenka no Jutsu."

A barrage of fireballs showered the forest floor and Lee was hard pressed to dodge all of them as he bounced between the ground and the trees. He winced as a long electric blue spear shot at him almost too fast for him to react. It sliced effortlessly through the tree trunk behind him as he flipped backward. He pushed himself high into the air as Sasuke chopped at his arms. Lee kicked off the closest tree and tried to attack, but the electrified current rose up again. He twisted in the air and landed to the side.

"Face it. You cannot hope to defeat me. You can't even touch me, which makes everything you know useless." Sasuke rested his blade on his shoulder. "I have no interest in weaklings, so leave now while I'm feeling merciful."

"Would this be the same mercy you showed Sakura-chan when she released you?"

"I did nothing to her. Orochimaru temporarily gained control and struck."

"You left her alone and dying!"

Sasuke stared emotionlessly at the green clad ninja.

"I had no desire to harm her, but I was not going to help her either."

"There is no difference."

"I will not bother arguing with someone like you. I have no interest in the people of my past. My focus rests squarely on killing my brother and making sure the world reveres the Uchiha."

"The world will not revere an arrogant weakling."

Sasuke's lips twisted up into and amused smile.

"And how does someone like you have the audacity to call me weak?"

"Because that is what you are, and what I will prove."

Lee ripped the flask off his belt and undid the cork at the top. He took a single sip before returning it to its resting place. He smoothly slid into a stance as his muscles relaxed. It had taken a great deal of testing… and caused Gai-sensei to suffer a great number of bruises, but the result was worth it. One part sake to one hundred parts water was the perfect mixture that allowed him to experience the benefits of his drunken state without the… unsavory behavior that had resulted from it in the past. Even as deluded as the mixture was, a single sip still helped him loosen up significantly.

"Seimon open!"

His skin turned a shade darker and he blasted forward again. Sasuke only had enough time to bring his sword up to defend himself. Lee's fist smashed against the flat of the blade and the steel shattered.

"Konoha Daisenpu!" Lee spun rapidly in the air with a deadly spin kick and Sasuke was sent crashing backwards as his skidding body formed a ditch through the ground.

The Uchiha rolled to his feet and his cursed seal raged to life. His skin turned dark grey and a large dark cross appeared on the center of his face. Two claw like wings opened on his back and a shining black Chidori roared to life in his left hand. Lee sprung forward again and they engaged in a series of blocks and strikes. Sasuke attempted to drive the evil Chidori through Lee's body, but the latter managed to mostly evade every attempt. Although, he was still caught in the residual energy the attack produced.

"Enough of this!" Sasuke threw the Chidori high into the air. He made a quick hand sign and it exploded.

He leapt back and Lee watched in horror as the lightning attack surged in the sky and gathered several clouds around it. They darkened as they entered the lightning cloud and Sasuke swung his empty hand down.

"Kirin!"

The clouds burst and a strange lightning beast shot down. Lee's eyes barely had a chance to widen before it was upon him.

"Shomo-."

His command for the fourth gate was cut short as the beast crashed into him. The ground split and twenty feet of forest was leveled in an electric explosion. Sasuke cautiously returned to his normal form as he panted.

"Not as powerful as when I summon a full storm, but it was more than enough to deal with that fool." Sasuke stood tall and walked to the center of the crater.

He heard someone cough and a light breeze pushed away the smoke and dust. Lee was sprawled out on the ground as the last vestiges of the external chakra that occurred with the summoning of the fourth gate flickered and died. His chunin vest was almost completely destroyed and his suit was decorated with burns, rips, and missing patches. He wheezed painfully and clenched his fist amongst the ashes of the ground as he tried to push himself up.

A small scowl crept across Sasuke's face. He lifted his hand and the sound of birds chirping filled the air. Lee looked up weakly and started to reach for his flask. Sasuke was on him in an instant. The missing-nin wrenched the flask from the weak grip and looked it over carefully. He took out the cap and sniffed it before he tossed it to the ground.

"Why?" Lee asked as he reached for the flask. "Why did you fall so far?"

"I never fell… I ascended. While you were playing at ninja, I was learning real techniques and achieving real strength."

"Yet you have abandoned everyone and have even gone so far as to leave someone to die. What good is power if you do not help someone?" Lee grasped the flask and pulled it to him.

"Someone who doesn't know my pain could never understand my path. I have a higher calling as an Uchiha and an avenger, that is all you need to know." Lee flopped onto his back and started to down the contents of the flask in its entirety. "Now enough of this dribble. I've let you have your final moments to make peace. Be thankful for my mercy."

Sasuke thrust his hand down, but Lee caught the arm in mid strike. He took one last gulp and tossed the flask to the side. The taijutsu master's charcoal black eyes stared up defiantly.

"You are indeed powerful Uchiha. You know many techniques, far more powerful than I will ever be able to master. You are a genius and have had legendary teachers." Lee's grip tightened even more so. "However, you have lacked the knowledge that comes through hard work. More importantly, you have neglected the most basic concepts of observation. You dismissed my flask because you personally saw no value to it. What you should have been concerned about Sasuke… was that I wanted it."

"What are you going on about now dead la-?"

"Kaimon open! Kyumon open! Seimon open! Shomon open! Tomon open!" Lee's skin gained a dark reddish tinge as blood pumped more furiously through his body. Wild chakra surrounded him even though he lacked the ability to utilize it. Sasuke's eyes bled into the Sharingan as he tried to pull away and the curse seal started to spread. "Keimon open!"

Sasuke was blasted back and had to use his wings to slow himself so that he could land softly. Lee rose to his feet slowly, as if he was testing his body. The usual fatigue, strain, and lack of pupils that accompanied the gates were absent. Lee's body seemed relatively relaxed despite the power it was generating. Essentially, he had become the eye of the storm.

Sasuke charged his dark Chidori to life and prepared to charge as Lee looked up at him slowly… then disappeared. The Sharingan could keep up with the green clad boy, but Sasuke angrily found himself unable to react as efficiently as he would like. He swung his lightning charged hand, but Lee caught the arm and took the momentum of the attack. He flipped Sasuke face first into the ground.

The missing-nin summoned the current around his body and flipped up onto his feet. A confident smirk grew on his features as Lee glared at the electric current.

"You see you fool! Even with your self-destructive power, it can't help but yield to my Uchi-."

Lee appeared in front of him and launched a bone-crunching barrage of strikes. Knees, kicks, elbows, and fists blasted Sasuke with out slowing. His red eyes widened as he saw the strikes were moving between the arks of electricity. A viscous punch to the center of his face sent him tumbling back. He rolled into a crouch as Lee stood over the top of him.

"Your lightning shield is impressive. However, I see now that the arks are either consciously controlled or set to a rhythm. It is easy to get past with enough speed."

Sasuke's Sharingan spun as he locked his eyes with Lee. However, his face quickly paled as Lee stared back unflinchingly.

"How? How are you not ensnared by my genjutsu? No one can escape my eyes!"

"I apologize, but I do not reveal my abilities to my enemies."

Sasuke went to lunge with a Chidori, but Lee used an uppercut to launch him high into the air. The missing-nin spiraled higher and higher until he was towards the top of the trees. Lee leapt up and bounced from tree to tree in a blur. With each pass, he struck the defenseless Uchiha. Every strike came faster and harder until it stopped suddenly. Sasuke looked down to see his wrists tied up in Lee's bandages. He looked up twenty feet higher and the green clad ninja stared down coldly.

"Konoha Tatsumaki!"

Lee started to spin Sasuke and himself in the air. The Uchiha crashed through any trees that were in his path. The spin increased as the Uchiha was swung helplessly from the end of the bandage made rope. Lee clenched his teeth and forced his exhausted muscles to increase the speed even further. The two became a circular blur as the wind started to twist and rapidly follow them. The wind grew louder with every cycle until a terrifying howl echoed through the sky. A massive twister churned around them, pulling whatever it could into its vortex.

Lee shouted out and gave one last all powerful swing that sent Sasuke spiraling down headfirst at the speed of the twister straight into the ground. The helpless body was drilled through the earth as the winds surrounding it tore apart the ground increasing the size of the current crater. Sasuke finally stopped and could only look up in half dazed horror as Lee fell towards him like a meteor.

Lee landed on the Uchiha with the points of his knees and elbows. Blood escaped from Sasuke's mouth as rocks were kicked up into the air and his body was pushed further down. The impact was so great that the force caused Lee to bounce and land flat on his back fifteen feet away. The battlefield slowly settled and all that could be heard was Lee's ragged breathing.

He stared at the sky as he panted heavily. His muscles ached worst than they had in a long time. The diluted sake helped keep him relaxed when opening the gates, which prevented a great deal of the damage, but six gates still took a heavy toll on him. He doubted he'd be able to move for a week.

He rolled onto his stomach and shakily looked up as the dust cleared. Sasuke remained on the ground motionless aside from shallow pain induced gasps. Lee frowned. The traitor was still alive and he didn't have the power to finish him off. The hair stood up on the back of his neck as he felt a presence enter the field. His eyes widened as a figure appeared next to the Uchiha's body. His bandaged body didn't match with the speed and grace with which the old man moved. Lee recognized him as soon as the man turned… Danzo.

Two Root members landed next to the old man and hoisted Sasuke out of the hole.

"Wha- what are you doing?" Lee renewed his struggle to stand as the war monger stared down at him.

"It is far too dangerous to let this boy wander about with Orochimaru's cells in his body. Your Hokage has already proven herself ineffective at being able to keep the boy in check. You have done a commendable job in serving your village." Danzo turned back to Sasuke. "However, the rest of the world must believe the Uchiha was destroyed."

"You're going to experiment on him!"

"Be content in your next life knowing you helped shape the future of Konoha."

One of the Root went to move forward, but everyone froze as the forest shook with a chilling roar. Two red chakra claws tore through the trees straight for the group of traitors. The Root agent dropped Sasuke as they and Danzo barely had a chance to dodge. The claws

engulfed Sasuke and Naruto walked into the crater. A lone red tail swung slowly behind his chakra cloak.

Naruto stared at his chakra claws as Sasuke's Sharingan blazed to life and attempted to stifle the demonic energy. A panicked expression plastered itself on his face when the claws only squeezed tighter.

"Sorry Sasuke, but that won't work in your weakened state. You can't run anymore."

"Uzumaki put him down." Danzo said as his Root looked ready to attack.

"Sorry, but I won't let Orochimaru's regenerative abilities fall into your hands you traitorous bastard." Naruto gave one last sad look at his old friend. "Goodbye Sasuke. I'm sorry for failing you."

"Uzumaki stop!"

"Rasengan!"

Sasuke screamed in agony as the energy within the claws spun. A human sized Rasengan took shape around the traitor, and instantly, the body was reduced to nothingness. Naruto swung the Rasengan at the remaining three traitors. They dodged as the giant sphere exploded; leaving no trace that Sasuke had ever been in it.

Naruto ran over to Lee and picked him up while he wrapped the battered ninja's arm over his neck. He leapt back as one of the agents lunged for him.

"Bastards," Naruto mumbled as he forced chakra to his feet and tried to kick the masked attacker.

"Naruto-kun, you can't fight them while carrying me."

"Shut up Lee. I'm pissed at you enough as it is, so I don't want you playing hero."

Lee let his head hang limply as Naruto landed in a cloud of dust. The agent jumped back to Danzo's side quietly.

"That was beyond foolish Nine Tails."

"It's better than letting you gain the means to repairing your injuries. You're a big enough pain in the ass as you are now."

"I tire of your insolence. It is time I rectify Sarutobi's mistake in letting you live."

The old man tapped his cane on the ground confidently, as if he were giving some form of signal. Danzo and his men looked puzzled for a moment as a feral grin stretched across Naruto's face.

"What's the matter? You lose something you old fart?" Naruto chuckled and brought his hand up into a familiar cross shape sign. "I'd love to beat you down, but unfortunately, Baa-chan will want to know what's happened.

The chakra molded around his fingers easily, but the moment the technique was about to activate, it dissipated into the air. More specifically, it was sucked from his hands. He slowly turned his head as his eyes widened. A toothy shark like grin beamed down at him as the blue skinned missing-nin lifted his sword high in the air.

"Hiya brat!"

Jiraiya dusted his hands off happily as the final Root member in the forest fell to his feet. He'd rounded up all of them and had his toads imprison them in their stomachs. He doubted they would talk, especially given the cursed seal on their tongues. However, it was always wise to keep potential pawns in play. You never knew when it could come in handy.

He leapt off towards the sounds of the battlefield. The fact that he could sense the battle this far out was impressive. The Uchiha made

sense, but Gai's student keeping the fight even really impressed him. Although, the stupidity at charging off alone was all too similar to his own charge. A frown tugged at his lips. Naruto had learned a bitter lesson today, and it was one that no one ever wanted to. You can lose loved ones at any time, even to those you are trying to help. It was something most ninja would experience at least once. The younger generation was lucky that it was isolated, instead of rampant like war time. Regardless of when, it still wasn't easy to deal with and many shinobi were scarred irreparably by it.

However, he had faith his student would recover and gain even more determination… if that was possible. A chuckle that he had forming died on his lips as he felt a new chakra enter the battlefield after Naruto's. It was like an explosion that matched the other Jinchuriki. He'd felt that chakra before and it wasn't easily forgotten. He pumped more chakra to his feet as a small spark of panic flickered in the back of his mind.

Kisame Hoshigaki was without a doubt the worst possible adversary Naruto had out of the Akatsuki. It wasn't because the missing-nin was extremely powerful. No, it was because of that blasted sword of his. Jiraiya didn't know how, but the Samehada could disrupt and devour chakra within an unknown range. Given that all of Naruto's attacks were close range and made purely of chakra… it meant that aside from hand to hand combat there was little, if anything, his student could do. The other more troubling problem was that Itachi Uchiha wouldn't be far behind.

Naruto dodged to the side as the bandaged sword swung down with ridiculous force. He nearly lost his footing as the ground cracked where the sword impacted. The shark man's grin grew even wider and he lunged forward. Naruto tossed Lee high up in the air and summoned a clone to catch him. The clone gave a nod and grabbed the airborne ally before he took off towards the village. Naruto tossed a brief glanced over at Danzo and his cronies. Lee had to make it back to the village in order to tell Baa-chan about what had

happened. With his testimony and Jiraiya's backing, they could deal with Danzo for good. However, he was sure the bandaged man wouldn't let that happen.

"Hey pay attention you little bastard!" Kisame said as he swung again.

Naruto cursed as he ducked and flicked a kunai into his hand. The wind element poured into the blade and lengthened the edge. He swung, but his eyes widened as the chakra dissipated once again. Kisame laughed and kicked Naruto square in the gut. The blonde gasped out as the wind was knocked out of him and he bounced across the ground. He grit his teeth and flipped onto his feet. Damn it, he'd have to use that. Without even asking for it, the fox poured its portion of the mixture in.

A purple fox shaped cloak of chakra covered him effortlessly and two tails emerged. The air swirled around him as he crouched down. Two other clones materialized next to him, each had a cloak with a single tail. One turned and lunged after Danzo while the other began to shape the chakra in Naruto's outstretched palm. A massive orb quickly took shape. The clone grinned and took off after the other one, while Naruto charged forward. Kisame mirrored the motion enthusiastically.

"Yoko: Odama Rasengan!" Naruto thrust his hand forward and clashed with the bandaged sword.

The attacks fought against each other evenly for a moment before the Rasengan stared to give. A shocked expression spread across Naruto's face as the spiraling ball and his cloak were sucked into the sword. He didn't have a chance to yell as the sword swept under his arm and caught him cleanly in the chest.

His body could only make a giant snap.

Kisame watched happily as the blonde soared across the landscape and landed in a heap. The happy grin slowly turned into a frown as

he started to walk forward.

"Only seventy feet? Damn, I was hoping for at least ninety."

Naruto lay crumpled on the ground and wide eyed as he tried to suck in a breath. His ribs and chest had been shattered, while his right lung had literally popped. What the hell had happened? He was sure that the Rasengan had been stabilized, so why? Was it that sword? Red chakra started to seep from his body and he could feel the damage starting to mend. As the pain lessoned, he tried to come up with a plan.

He craned his neck as he heard two pops behind him. The clones had been destroyed. From their memories, Sasuke's brother had done it and was staring down Danzo. He had no idea why, but as long as the old bastard was being stalled he didn't care. With a wince, he started to pull more chakra from the Kyubi. His bones felt like they were almost ready to mend when the accursed sword was plunged into the ground by his head. Immediately, the healing stopped and the chakra was stolen from him.

"Now, now, I don't want you healing up to much. As much fun as it would be to fight you, I have my orders." The blue skinned man looked up. "Hey Itachi, forget about the old guy and let's go!"

Naruto struggled to sit up, but the man looked down at him sadistically and brought his foot up. He stomped down hard on Naruto's face with a sickening crunch, and the world went black.

Itachi stared down impassively as Danzo's guards moved in front of their master. He wasn't concerned with them. They had already been caught in his genjutsu. If they became a nuisance, he could activate it at anytime. He turned his attention to the one man more responsible than any other for ruining his life. Well, that may not be the most accurate summary. The Uchiha had brought their fate down upon themselves. However, this man was the one who,

uncompromisingly, ordered their destruction. Danzo, the leader of Root and quite possibly the most corrupt man in Konoha.

Itachi had made it an effort to know as much as possible about the old man. Danzo had, on numerous attempts, tried to take control of the village through any means necessary… often at the expense of someone else. Even the invasion of Sound was laced with his presence. After all, nothing went on inside the village's walls without that man knowing.

In some ways, Itachi understood Danzo. The man was so loyal to Konoha that he would destroy every last living thing to keep its walls standing. The problem arose from his unwillingness to compromise. For him, death, retreat, and subterfuge were the only means of securing control. It was why he felt only he was fit to be Hokage, and it was why the man had done so many horrible things in his quest for that position.

"You were a fool not to listen to me Danzo." Itachi said as he felt Naruto's chakra rise suddenly. "I warned you not to harm Sasuke."

"And I did not."

His Sharingan flared to life.

"These eyes see through your treachery. I know you were behind the incident that occurred recently. It would also not surprise me if you let Orochimaru take him in the first place."

"Assumptions and accusations hold little value when coming from a missing-nin."

"They do with a Hokage's backing."

Danzo stiffened ever so slightly. It was well hidden as always, but when the man cracked open his one good eye, Itachi knew he had struck a chord. He knew it was a risk to speak freely, but he no longer had the strength to remain silent.

"Sarutobi has long since passed on and so has anyone willing to help you Itachi. You are a missing-nin and will remain as such. Besides, we both know you will not put the village you slaughtered your family for in harms way."

"Yes, you speak the truth. I still am concerned with Konoha's safety. However, you did not head my warning, and for that, you will pay the price."

"You intend to kill me then?"

The two Root agents shifted forward and Itachi lifted a finger. They stopped in mid-step as if paralyzed. Danzo slowly lifted his hand towards his bandaged eye.

"There is no need for you to reveal your diseased eye. I will not kill you. Like Orochimaru, you would find some way to run."

Danzo relaxed slightly and his hand dropped back to his cane.

"What purpose do you have in confronting me then? Are you merely keeping me distracted so your partner can collect the Nine Tails?"

"No, I am here to tell you that you will not be returning to Konoha. I have personally delivered a scroll detailing everything that occurred in the past to the Godaime Hokage. Every failed coup, secret dealing, and traitorous action you have committed is now in her hands."

"You are a poor liar Itachi. There is no way to have knowledge of any of these alleged dealings. Besides, that woman's word against my own would have little merit."

"In the world of Tsukuyomi, the sealed tongues of your agents become rather loose. And as far as the Godaime's word, given Jiraiya-san's and the young ninja's report on what occurred here today, it should help authenticate it."

"No more than casting suspicion on me and having me watched."

"Yes, but you should have realized the Sandaime was never unaware of your actions. He just chose to tolerate them, but provided a means to stop you if necessary. The Fire Daimyo had been alerted by the Sandaime many years ago, that if I ever were to send him a scroll with information related to you, the Daimyo should value it highly."

Danzo gripped the top of his cane tightly.

"You mean?"

"Yes, if he hasn't read it already, the Daimyo is reading about your exploits. With the backing of two Kages and Jiraiya of the Sannin, you will be executed for treason if you return to Konoha."

"Hey Itachi, forget about the old guy and let's go!" Kisame called out from across the battlefield.

Itachi hid a frown as he saw his partner standing over the broken form of the Kyubi's Jinchuriki. He turned to walk away as his genjutsu dispelled, but paused as Danzo called out to him.

"I will claim my rightful place as Hokage Itachi. Do not think your actions will prevent me from gaining that position."

Itachi looked over his shoulder. The red eyes of the Sharingan stared down menacingly.

"Flee Danzo. Get as far ahead of your sins as you can, because they are coming to destroy you."

He strode away from the old man as he saw Kisame hoist Naruto onto his shoulder. His eyes drifted over briefly to where his brother had finally met his end. There was nothing for him now. No way to atone through death, or hope for his brother to redeem their family. There was nothing… but Akatsuki.

Hinata felt as if ice water had been dumped into her lungs. Jiraiya's words endlessly repeated themselves in her head. Akatsuki had Naruto. It was such a simple but overwhelming statement, a simple phrase that had earth shattering meaning behind it. She knew of what almost happened to Gaara, everyone did. All chunin and jonin had been told of the Akatsuki. They had been told that Naruto was one of their targets. And it had filled her with joy that they had been determined to keep their fellow ninja safe.

However, now the mood was not so uplifting. Lee was in intensive care, although he was stable. Sakura had been killed within the safety of Konoha's hospital. Naruto was captured and the extraction process could occur at any time… a process that would end up killing him. She looked around at the somber group in the waiting room to the Hokage's office. Shikamaru, Shino, and Sai remained silent as they leaned up against the far wall. They were both lost in their thoughts. Kakashi kept his nose buried in that perverted book of his. But she knew all of their attention was on the door to their leader's office, where she and Jiraiya were fiercely discussing their options.

Today had started out on a high note with Naruto asking her to stay with him. Her depressed mood from the night before had been significantly uplifted. So, it was not the news she had been expecting when Kiba had come barreling into the training ground on Akumaru's back. All she had been told was that Sakura was hurt. She had run as fast as she could, but by the time she got there Sakura had already passed on. Hinata had listened in a daze as the head doctor explained everything that he new. Her only focus had been staring at Sakura's still form… and the white sheet they were draping over her.

Tsunade-sama took over the story after the doctor finished. Apparently, Orochimaru had used highly acidic venom that reacted too quickly for even Tsunade to stop. It didn't poison the body. It corroded, no melted it. The fact that Sakura had lasted as long as

she did was a testament to her astounding ability. Hinata didn't want to think about what she had gone through.

However, what had broken her from her daze was that Naruto and Lee had charged off on their own. She would have done the same if Tsunade hadn't forbidden her from doing so. Instead, they had returned to the office and waited. They discussed what had happened in more detail, and the final moments Naruto and Sakura shared. It was cut short when the missing-nin Itachi Uchiha had appeared.

It had informed them that it was a clone and dropped a single scroll on the table before dispersing into a flock of crows. Hinata had watched as Tsunade cautiously opened the scroll and read. Her hazel eyes had grown wider as they dropped to each new line. Hinata had remained silent, since it was not her place to ask, but her curiosity had still skyrocketed.

Tsunade had finished a moment before Jiraiya blasted through the window. He'd said that he found Lee hanging limply from a tree branch like he had been dropped… like a clone carrying him had been dispelled. The toad sage had surmised what had happened in moments and returned back to the village. Tsunade had ordered Hinata to gather her new team and Kakashi before locking herself in her office with Jiraiya… two hours ago.

Lee watched the sun set slowly in the horizon as his room steadily grew darker. He knew he should be resting, but the fact that the clone carrying him had disappeared suddenly made him worry. Jiraiya's tense mood when he found him did little to ease it. Nor did that strange shark man in the Akatsuki garb.

I'm pissed at you enough as it is!

He clenched his hands into the sheets. Had he been wrong in going off by himself and fighting Sasuke? Was that why Naruto was so upset with him? Or was it the fact that Naruto could not claim

revenge that had him upset? It didn't really matter. The blonde was the one to end the life of their one time comrade. Lee had failed to do even that, to spare his friend of that pain and responsibility.

He shook his head and looked around the room. It was empty. Just like that time after the chunin exams. Lee looked down at his hands. Naruto had visited him when he didn't even know him. In just a few meetings, the blonde had considered him a friend. It had left an impression and a sense of gratitude that had grown as he matured. Kindness… it was such a simple act. Yet, as he grew older, he began to realize how precious it was and how freely his friend gave it.

A thought dawned on him. Naruto was kind.

I'm pissed at you enough as it is!

Naruto wasn't saying that he felt robbed or betrayed. The blonde was saying he was worried about him. He was relieved he hadn't been killed by the traitor.

Lee relaxed slightly at that thought. He rested his head on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling. Why wasn't Naruto back yet?

Itachi watched as Kisame threw the boy on the ground in their hidden cave. Several figures moved from the shadows and circled around the battered blonde. Konan, Pain, and Madara were all there in the flesh. For so many of the Akatsuki to gather in person, it alluded to the importance of what was happening. Naruto twisted up weakly towards their faces and scowled.

"You morons suck at decorating your clubhouse," Naruto coughed out.

Itachi could tell the boy was in immense pain. Kisame was sadistic like that. He'd let the boy have just enough chakra to keep him alive,

but not enough to recuperate. He watched silently as Madara crouched down and cocked his head to the side.

"Aw, the little boy is trying to be tough." He patted the blonde on the head. "Tobi likes you!"

"Get away from me."

"Tobi thinks you're afraid."

"Yeah, well Tobi is a dumb ass."

Itachi watched as Madara's child like façade almost slipped. However, the ancient Uchiha held it together and stood up.

"Can do the cool thing now?" Madara asked.

Pain shook his head.

"The beasts must be extracted in order," the leader said. "Besides, the process will take longer than three days with Sasori and Deidara gone."

"But, Tobi thought only the sealing had to be in order?"

"Yes, but we have no place to house the Kyubi's spirit if we extract it."

"Oh Tobi knows!" The disguised Uchiha waved his hand excitedly over his head. "We can make a box to put it in!"

Kisame snorted back a laugh. Itachi watched silently as Madara looked over at him expectantly. It was a silent order.

"With my Sharingan, I could fortify a sealing statue to temporarily house the Nine Tailed Fox. It would keep the beast sedated until the rest are sealed, and it would also help speed up the extraction," Itachi said. He glanced up at Pain. "Could you summon another of the extraction statues?"

Pain stared at him intently for a few minutes before glaring down at Naruto. His Rinnegan made the man seem even more imposing. However, Itachi noticed the boy glared back with just as much intensity. The blue eyes didn't show a shred of hate, just determination and a promise to fight until the end. It almost made him take a step back. How could this child, battered and beaten, continue to look up at them unflinchingly? They were the same eyes his little brother had at one time… so long ago when they were a family.

"I could summon a smaller one as long as you are confident you can control the beast Itachi."

"I am."

"Very well, we can begin in an hour once Kakuzu and Hidan arrive. All of us being here in physical form will help expedite the process."

Kisame stabbed his sword into the ground and walked over to Itachi as the others started to walk out to various caverns.

"I told Samehada to keep nibbling at the kid. I'm going to go get something to eat. You coming?"

"No, I will remain here and make sure nothing happens to the Jinchuriki."

"Suit yourself."

Itachi watched Naruto silently as Kisame walked out. The blonde looked up at him and his lips curled up into a snarl.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

"You are unpredictable Naruto-kun, and my target. It would be unwise not to give you my full attention."

Naruto winced as he tried to move, but the sword must have pulled at his chakra harder because he quickly paled and became still

again. Itachi sat down on the cold stone floor silently. Minutes passed in the dark cave and only Naruto's painful wheezing could be heard.

"I'm sorry, about Sasuke," Naruto said as he looked up at the ceiling.

"Why do you apologize? He was your enemy, and I have cut off ties long ago."

"Because he was your family and that doesn't change."

Itachi blinked in surprise. An apology was not what he expected in a conversation such as this, especially a sincere one.

"Do you hate me Naruto-kun? If it were not for me, Sasuke would have stayed in Konoha. Was he not your friend?"

"I don't hate you. I don't like you for sure, but I don't hate you. Sasuke made his own choices, and I gave him more chances than I should have." Naruto gave a pained grin. "The truth is. If he hadn't killed Sakura, I would never stopped trying to save him."

"So he murders one person and you give up?"

"No, Sakura was different. Sakura was the one person in this world that would have sacrificed everything for the good in him. She was determined to save that one last spec of decency in his soul. The fact that he left her to die showed that he had fully made his choice. After all, if he could have left someone like that to a painful death, what could I have done to change his mind?"

The room fell silent again, and despite his vast intelligence, Itachi couldn't come up with an answer.

It was long after dark when the door opened to the Hokage's office. Hinata's head almost popped off as fast as she snapped it around. Jiraiya waved them into the office and they all filed in quickly.

Tsunade looked weary as she sat behind her desk. It was a look that everyone in the room shared. Jiraiya shut the door and the Hokage climbed to her feet and looked out across the village behind her.

"I am sorry for keeping all of you waiting. There are a number of issues that hold great priority to the village, and unfortunately, they had to be discussed before I could assign you a mission."

"Hokage-sama, with all do respect isn't going after Naruto fairly straightforward?" Sai asked. He winced when she shot a glare at him. "I'm sorry. My tongue is a little less weighed down now that the seal has been removed."

"Normally you would be correct Sai, however a great deal of information has come to light and my forces are limited. It made the selection for a rescue team difficult."

"Are we not the rescue team?" Shino asked.

"Yes, but you five are not enough. We believe that a large number of the Akatsuki have gathered in one place. One or two members are usually dangerous enough, but Jiraiya has received reports that there may be up to four in Fire Country."

"That would require at least four squads comprised of a jonin and three chunin each," Shikamaru said as he rubbed his chin. "Or a smaller squad with ninja of comparable strength to the Akatsuki members."

"Yes," Jiraiya said with a nod. "But as stated earlier, other matters require the majority of the ninja forces. And honestly, Tsunade and I are the only pure S-class ninja here… no offense Kakashi."

"None taken."

"And we can't leave the village," Tsunade said. "Honestly, we can't even spare all of you."

"Hokage-sama, you act as if you still haven't made a decision," Sai said and once again received a glare. "Who is going after Naruto and when do we leave?"

"Sai-kun," Hinata turned to him before Tsunade could retort. "Please show Hokage-sama a little more patience. She is trying to tell us her thought process as a sign of respect." She turned back to her leader. "You are afraid you are sending us on a suicide mission correct, Sensei?"

Tsunade looked shocked for a moment before a weary smile crept up on her lips.

"That sums it up nicely Hinata. Yes, apart from personal feelings, if Naruto was not a Jinchuriki I would have a tough time justifying this mission."

"Then we are lucky are we not? How do I know this? Because we have an excuse to go rescue our fellow leaf-nin." Shino walked toward the center of the room. "As I do with all teammates, I have placed a female bug on him for tracking purposes. It would be wise for me to be a part of the rescue team."

"You need a jonin to lead and my dogs will be able to provide backup in the tracking department." Kakashi snapped his book shut and pocketed it. "I also request to be on the team."

"I will also be accompanying them," a voice called outside from the window.

Everyone turned to the familiar figure with red hair and a gourd on his back.

"Gaara of Suna, what are you doing here?" Tsunade asked. "I sent the messenger hawk only eight hours ago."

"It arrived three hours ago. I molded my sand into a large bird and flew. It was… improvised, but successful."

"I can't in good conscience ask the leader of our ally to go on such a dangerous mission."

"I'm not asking for permission, Hokage-dono."

Tsunade sighed in annoyance, but nodded her head in consent. She cast one last look at Hinata. The message was clear to the girl… do not volunteer. Hinata had a guess as to why. While she paled in comparison to Sakura, she was a good medic-nin and whatever her leader had planned would have need of her. As much as it hurt, she couldn't be selfish. She would have to place her faith in the others and wait for Naruto-kun's safe return.

"Sai, I am putting you under Jiraiya's supervision until Kakashi returns. Shikamaru and Hinata, summon all available ninja to the council room. I don't care about rank. The rest of you, good luck and bring the knuckle head back."

Naruto was jostled awake. He hadn't realized exactly when he had passed out, but assumed it wasn't long ago. His head tilted to the side. He was levitating above the ground in some kind of reddish aura. Why was he in a floating bubble? A large stone statue rested on the far wall. Its ten stone eyes were closed tightly and various cloaked figures stood on its outstretched fingers. It looked so familiar to him, but he couldn't put his finger on where he had seen it before.

He rested his head back. The pain had lessened substantially. Actually, he couldn't feel much of anything… kind of like a dream. It was peaceful in a way. Wait, why was he in pain before? He'd been fighting someone and gotten hurt. A sharp roar from the Kyubi in the back of his mind snapped his attention out of its stupor.

"Oh cra-!"

The aura surged and he erupted into a silent scream that shattered his existence.

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

Well, I can honestly say that this is one of the longest fight scenes I have ever written. Not even the final scene in my book was that long.

I hope that you enjoyed the chapter and that everything was explained enough. As far as Sasuke, I wanted to portray him as the aloof and Uchiha focused character he was at the start of Shippuden, with the darker and more twisted nature (from the current manga) creeping just below the surface.

A couple quick updates. I don't have to be at the dojo next week so I will have more time to hopefully write something other than Naruto. I do enjoy this, but I have three original stories that need some attention. (Not to mention I need to find time to do a final edit on my book) Anyway, if anyone has been reading the others I appreciate your patience and I hope to have everything going again soon.

Also, I will be adding a Naruto Asunder section to the WSE Forums if you want to check it out.

See you next week.

Mist

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 10:

Lee stared blankly at the ceiling, as his mind went over his fight with the Uchiha. How he had kept pace with the genius without resorting to the upper gates still surprised him. It had been a long and trying road, but he was finally starting to see the results of his training. His thoughts drifted back several years to the night where he had been soundly defeated by a sapling. The slap to his face had given him a moment of clarity that bordered on enlightenment. He'd raced through Konoha and nearly tore down his teacher's door.

The sapling's movements had made him realize the components of his training that he had lacked… flexibility and relaxation. It seemed so simplistic now that he had thought about, but before he was constantly pushing himself… and becoming tenser and tenser. It was the primary reason why the gates were so devastating to the user. The degree by which the forced chakra made the muscles tense caused the body to breakdown and tear itself apart. However, he had theorized that if he could remain relaxed, the gates would be much less self-destructive. Gai-sensei had agreed out of sheer curiosity.

They had drastically altered his training regimen that same night. Where before stretching had been merely part of a warm up, he now was put through grueling flexibility exercises. While speed and strength were still pushed to their limits, he had been taught flowing and relaxation techniques to mix within his current taijutsu. They had also begun to have him fight different opponents to train him against various forms of combat. Gai had said that even if he couldn't use chakra, the rest of the ninja population did. It had been during a

training session with Kurenai and her team that they had accidentally discovered his immunity to genjutsu.

The results of his varied training had been impressive. His body had rewarded his more gentle methods with tremendous increases to his physical abilities, and he had become quite knowledgeable about both other opponents and his own weaknesses. However, he still had felt himself not reaching a true state of relaxation. The kind of state that was needed if he was to be the first ninja to truly master the gates.

It had taken a great deal of badgering his teacher, but finally, the man had revealed the dark secret of Lee's drunken abilities. While Lee did not want to exhibit such unsavory behavior, he was intrigued by the possibilities. With Tsunade-sama's help, they had begun categorizing and studying his drunken state… and experimenting with the proper mixture of alcohol and water. The goal had been to find just the perfect balance between relaxation and control.

For two years, trial and error had dominated his training. His teacher's faith in his student had made him tolerant of the countless bruises he sustained. But at the end of two years, everything had paid off and he finally had a path to becoming a splendid ninja. His teacher and Hokage were both enthusiastic about his ability of possibly mastering the inner gates, or at the very least, eliminating the drawbacks of the first six. They surmised the eighth gate was still fatal, no matter how much he relaxed.

He let himself smile and gave a silent prayer of thanks. There was no doubt he had much farther to go, but for the first time, he could see progress. What was even more rewarding was the fact that he had new teammates and companions to share that growth with.

"What do you propose for a plan Kakashi-san?" Gaara asked as he leapt toward the next tree in front of him. His pale turquoise eyes cut through the night and always remained on Shino. Their sole link to his first friend. The bug user was in the lead and tracking as fast as

his bugs would allow. Gaara remained silent, but he knew that it was still far from fast enough to make it in time.

The silver haired jonin glanced over at him as Shino slowed his pace just enough to hear their conversation.

"Given our lack of numbers and close range fighters, I would suggest we copy the plan I made with Naruto. You two create a distraction, and I will sneak in from underground."

"Do you believe the same plan will work twice?"

"The two from before are dead, and I'm not sure if we have a choice anyway. It isn't like we can charge in there and fight our way to Naruto."

"I agree. However, should the need arise to fight, I can effectively stall multiple opponents. I believe the bug user is capable of this as well."

"It would be proper to address your teammate with their name, Kazekage-dono."

"It's Gaara.

"And I am Shino."

The two stared at each other for a moment and the temperature seemed to drop steadily. Kakashi chuckled nervously before he turned to Shino.

"Can you tell how far it is to get to Naruto?"

"The have stopped for the time being. How do I know this? It is because my Kikaichu males are steadily getting a stronger pheromone scent from the female. I highly doubt it is because we are faster than them."

"It means the extraction process has begun. It is an experience I personally would have preferred Uzumaki not endure."

"We need to pick up the pace then."

Itachi tried to keep his focus away from what was happening in front of him. He could feel the unspoken and anguished screams emanating from the boy. The blonde's mouth was stretched open wide, as if it would alleviate the pain. It was almost painful for Itachi to see. Why, he did not know.

Perhaps, it was because it was a fellow Konoha-nin. No, that wasn't it. He truly felt little connection to his home village anymore, just a lingering sense of loyalty. He believed the real reason was because what the boy had said resonated deeply within him. The Jinchuriki, no Naruto Uzumaki, had tried to save his brother. He had anguished for years over Sasuke's actions and tried to help lead his hopeless little brother back to the side of light. Even now, Naruto continued to view Sasuke as a lost friend instead of a traitor.

Because he was your family, and that doesn't change.

Even after eight hours of extraction and sealing, the words the blonde had spoken replayed themselves in his head. The circular thoughts startled him at first and confused him with their potency. Yet, he soon realized it was because he was truly grateful to the boy. Where he had done nothing, but cause Sasuke misery, Naruto had fought a losing battle to help him. He had done what family would do. Family… it was a word that had become almost foreign to him. Yet, the more he thought about it, the blonde had been Sasuke's family. Naruto had refused to give up and was endless with forgiveness. And now, just like the Uchiha, he was killing him. It disgusted him. Life disgusted him.

He was beaten and bitter and tired. He was sick of constantly sacrificing his heart for a purpose he didn't even recognize anymore. The only thing he knew was that Naruto was Sasuke's friend, and

that Konoha would need someone with that unwavering determination if the village was to survive the future calamities that Madara would invoke.

He dropped his hands and looked across the room at his partner. Kisame was cruel and probably the most vicious man he had ever met. However, he was loyal and had always been concerned with his well being. Itachi would miss traveling with him. His eyes morphed into the Mangekyo Sharingan and Kisame looked up at him slowly.

"Tsukuyomi."

The world faded to night until all that was left was Kisame and Itachi.

"What are you doing Itachi?" The shark man spoke calmly even as his hand clenched and unclenched, a subconscious reaction to nervousness. The man wanted his sword.

"You have been a welcome companion Kisame. I will miss your company… my friend."

"Hey Itachi wait-."

"For seventy-two hours, you will be left on a beach with an endless supply of shrimp and crab."

The world faded to the described scene as Itachi dropped himself out of the technique. He ignored the intense pain that shot through his left eye and forced himself to focus on the now staring members of the Akatsuki. He leapt down from the ledge to the cave floor and looked up at Pain and Madara.

"I will be taking Naruto-kun with me. If any of you wish to stop me, then I suggest you attack now."

He allowed himself to grin freely as Madara bristled behind his mask. The sheer anger directed through his hidden Sharingan was justice to Itachi. He had disrupted the man's plans… and Madara hated

having his plans disrupted. It was a small victory and ultimately futile, but God if he didn't savor every moment of it. His red eyes flicked to the left as Kakuzu leapt down.

"Itachi Uchiha, you'll fetch me my largest bounty yet," the rag-doll like man said and black tendrils started to swing about him. He glanced up at Pain. "I will deal with him quickly so the rest of you deal with the extraction."

Itachi remained still as the black threads of the Jiongu seeped out from Kakuzu's body and surrounded him until only his head remained. They waved about as if they were floating in the ocean as the tips of various masks occasionally peeked through. The man eyed the Uchiha calculatingly and slowly shifted a yellow mask shaped like a bull towards the front. Itachi watched passively as his mind cycled systematically through his situation. On one hand, he had to deal with this opponent quickly, as there was no guarantee that the others wouldn't jump in. However, he was positive that their main focus would be on Naruto. The other hand was a different matter. He had already used Tsukuyomi. Any other of his Mangekyo techniques would further exhaust him. It was a vexing predicament.

"Raiton: Gian." Kakuzu mumbled.

The threads pushed the mask forward and a massive spear of lightning shot out almost fast enough to catch Itachi off guard… almost. The electricity hit full on and a flock of crows burst apart from the remains. They steadily multiplied until Kakuzu was surrounded by an army of angry birds. His eyes narrowed and he pulled a dose of chakra from two of his masks directly into his body. The crows rapidly vanished and slowly Itachi materialized into view.

"I don't appreciate tricksters," Kakuzu said as red and blue masks appeared from within the sea of threads.

"I apologize."

The three masks he had out came near each other and suddenly blasted an intense wave of electrically charged fire. The cave was lit up and heat seared everything as the technique threatened to consume Naruto. Itachi reacted without a second thought. He leapt in front of where the Jinchuriki was suspended and his eyes cried tears of blood. A ghost like figure emerged from his body and enveloped himself and the one he sought to protect.

"Susanoo."

The fire beam impacted violently against the spirit's chest. Itachi cringed as he could feel the being pull more of his life from him in order to keep itself whole. He ignored the pain and focused on having the apparition bring forth its sword. The flame attack died out and Itachi struck before the smoke cleared. Kakuzu barely had a chance for his eyes to grow wide before the blade cut his entire body. He stared incredulously for a moment when no damage took hold. However, his eyes slowly closed and the threads stopped moving. His mind locked forever in a dream.

Itachi didn't waste anytime and focused his attack straight at the orange masked Madara. If he could kill him, then it would all be over. Konoha would be safe and the Akatsuki would fall. He just had to kill the ancient Uchiha. Susanoo swung its mighty blade… and cut only air. The air swirled in front of him and the terrible mask materialized followed by the body of his master. The man that had caused him so much pain. The man that had ordered him to kill his kind mother and ignore her screams.

Itachi let loose with the most powerful Amaterasu he could muster. He would hold nothing back. Black flames raced out and consumed the figure in front of him as the apparition cracked from the strain of his own attack. He collapsed to his knees as exhaustion overtook him and the fire burned. His eyesight started to dim, but he kept it focused on the spot Madara had stood. He needed to see the burning body, and then he could slip away into blissful sleep.

A black gloved hand waved to the side and the nightmarish flames disappeared. Madara stood completely unaffected and took a step forward as Itachi's eyes narrowed. The apparition pointed its blade towards itself and prepared to skewer both of them. However, Madara rose both hands up as his hidden Sharingan spun.

"Let's remove those eyes before you damage them permanently Itachi."

The younger Uchiha tried to summon one last attack from the mighty Susanoo, but the creature would not respond. He felt his heart slow to a stop, and the last thing felt before death came to comfort him, was two sets of fingers pressing into his eye sockets.

Jiraiya punched the wall of the darkened alley angrily. He ignored the pain in his hand… and the crater in the stone wall. Stupid… he was so stupid. How had he let them get to Naruto? After all the preaching about caution, he had let his amusement in dealing with the Root get the better of him. Lee's battle had left him confident that Naruto could handle the rest. Even if Danzo was there, the old cripple couldn't handle his student. However, Akatsuki had shown up unexpectedly… and he had been too far away to catch them.

Sure, he could have given chase and hope to catch up. However, doing so would have wasted valuable time if he had been wrong. It was a decision that he absolutely hated making… wait and give the enemy time, or charge in and waste more time. He'd charged after Orochimaru for years… and it had left his godson alone.

With a sigh, he pulled his hand from the wall and set his face in stone. Now wasn't the time for regrets. Konoha needed him and his full attention. He would have to leave his faith in Kakashi and the others. Cause if he messed up, the gaki wouldn't have a village to return to.

The pain had lulled for a moment. It was amazing that as terrible as it still was the reprieve from the full intensity made it seem like nothing more than a dull ache. However, it came back far to soon and the feeling of being ripped apart returned full force. He clenched his teeth to the point he thought they would shatter, but it didn't do any good. His blue eyes cracked open, as if being able to see would help lesson his pain. However, he was met with a dull world. Splashes of fiery red, blonde, and white were a stark contrast to the sickly yellows and pale blacks. Yet, it was blurred, like trying to stare at a painting through churning water.

"You!" The demonic voice of the Kyubi echoed angrily in his ears.

"Would you mind being quiet please, fox?" The mass of white and blonde said as it leaned over the center of his swimming vision. "You've gotten yourself in quite the mess here haven't you, Naruto."

He wanted to speak, to ask who this person was… and why this person was talking with the Kyubi. His chapped lips parted, and he could only manage a weak croak.

"Hey now, just lay there and relax. You get too worked up and it will make it harder for you to recover."

"There is no recovery from this flesh bag! The child is going to die and I… I will be captured and turned into a slave once again," the Kyubi said the last part quietly, as if it was truly saddened by its fate.

"You will be fine, as will he. He's as stubborn as his mother so I doubt this trial will be the end of him."

Naruto tried to make his eyes focus. This man knew his mother? He struggled to sit up, but a firm hand kept him in place.

"You're as impatient as her too."

Naruto felt the man place a hand on his seal. Fear rose up in his throat as he felt the seal start to twist… and open. He could hear the

large gates of the Kyubi's cage creak open. No… he had to stop that from happening.

"Stop it you fool! You will only serve to make it easier for them to extract me!"

"I know, but if I have to choose between saving his life or letting them temporarily imprison you… the choice is simple."

"I am a part of him. He will not survive without my presence! Besides, do you really condemn the world just to satisfy your personal feelings?"

"Condemn it? Actually, I'm confident Naruto will be able to stop what is coming… and you, Kyubi."

The fox howled in rage and tried to scramble further back into its cage as the gates continued to open. The pain was lessoning with each passing second, and Naruto could almost make out something pulling the Kyubi out. He turned back to the figure that was slowly taking the shape of a tall man. The man watched the Kyubi for a few moments before he turned back down to him.

"Naruto, this is a fail safe built into the seal. Its primary purpose was to repair the seal once it had fully eroded, but I also worried about your safety and Madara's plans. I left enough of my chakra behind so that if necessary, I could unlock your seal and save your life from a forced extraction. It will leave you weak, but if you are determined enough, you'll come back from it. I don't doubt Jiraiya will have a plan or two as well."

"W-who?" Naruto mumbled quietly.

"I'm someone who has faith you will stop Madara and lead this world to a new era of peace. I'm sure of it… son."

His vision faded to white and no matter how hard Naruto tried to call out… his voice was ensnared in his throat.

Tsunade leaned against the balcony as she stared out at several plumes of smoke that dotted the village landscape. She had been expecting a civil war, with ninja's fighting within the streets, and their safe houses being blown up once civilians were housed in them. Everyone had been prepared for a long bloody battle that would shake the village to its core. Instead, it had been a few isolated traps and a few injured ninjas. There were no deaths and very little change from a normal day. It was frustrating and relieving all in one breath.

She and Jiraiya had decided to wage war on Root. In one night, everything connected to Danzo had to be investigated and confiscated. From high ranking merchants to his pet goldfish, everything Danzo touched had been placed under scrutiny. There had been nothing. Every Root member had disappeared from the village. Every contact of Danzo's either didn't know anything… or was missing. The only violence that occurred was when her ninjas had infiltrated his secret strongholds beneath the village streets. They self-destructed the moment her ninjas entered. However, Sai's warnings had kept her ninja cautious… and safe.

She allowed herself to smile briefly. They had no way of tracking the old traitor down or learning about his activities, but she was comforted by knowing that any of his influence was gone. Jiraiya and Ibiki had personally made sure of that. All that was left was something she would take great personal satisfaction in. The door to her office opened and she fought to control the glee she was feeling as Homura and Koharu strode in confidently.

"Tsunade, why have you called for us at such and early hour? Did you find information regarding Danzo?" Koharu asked.

"No, but I did receive information directly from the Daimyo himself."

"The Daimyo?" Homura asked. "What is his opinion about this entire situation?"

"He was more interested in yours."

The two elders glanced at each other briefly. Homura cleared his throat and stepped forward.

"We believe that Danzo's actions and history were, in his belief, for the best interest of Konoha." Homura said. "However, his personal motivations clouded his judgment and made him commit acts that were treasonous. It is unfortunate."

Tsunade grinned.

"The Daimyo agreed completely. However, he also believes that given both of your histories in supporting Danzo's… actions, you would be best to retire."

The two stared at her for a moment as their eyes narrowed.

"What joke are you playing at, Tsunade?" Koharu asked sharply.

"The Daimyo believes that the two of you cannot be trusted, given your nearly unwavering consent to many of Danzo's schemes. I won't list all of them, but it is a very long list that often countermines the acting Hokage's own orders. The Daimyo does have a great deal of gratitude for your years of service so he asks that you retire with your honor intact. However, any contact with my ninja will be considered an act of subterfuge on behalf of Danzo, and it will be dealt with… firmly."

The elders stood frozen in shock. Their normal absolute composure seemed to be rapidly failing. If they had not been so arrogant in the past, Tsunade would have felt bad for them. They had devoted their lives to the village and its improvement. It was cruel to have it all blemished by suspicions of treason. Even with this incident kept secret, they would be cast aside and forgotten after all they did.

However, she firmly believed they had brought this upon themselves. They were too blinded by their own status to come to her as advisors with a different opinion. Instead, they flocked to Danzo and chastised

her as a child. Had they tried to teach instead of belittle and work with her instead of exclude… she would have argued on their behalf.

"That is all then Tsunade?" Koharu asked quietly and the Hokage nodded. "We offer our resignation from the council then. I pray for your success in leading this village. It will need it."

They turned and walked out slowly. The last vestiges of their pride falling away with each step. Tsunade sighed and turned back to look at her village. There was a lot of work to do.

The hair on the back of Kakashi's neck had been standing ever since Shino had said they were close. The entire situation felt… off. It wasn't the fact they were overpowered and potentially outnumbered. It was something that he couldn't put his finger on. As an experienced ninja, he valued his instincts more than any form of information. It was far more reliable.

Right now, his instincts weren't alerting him to any form of danger. Rather, they were telling him that things were not as they should be. It wasn't as specific as he would like it to be. The feeling only worsened when Shino led them to a cave that was open and lacked any form of defensive measure. He knew instantly that Akatsuki wasn't there. There was no way the group of high class ninja's would be that sloppy. It meant Naruto wasn't there… or worse.

They landed in front of the cave and gave each other a nod before Kakashi sunk under the ground and Gaara ran forward as the sand exploded from his gourd. Shino's bugs swarmed around him and formed a menacing cloud above the entrance. Kakashi swam ahead of them through the ground. He quickly made it to the center of the cave and could see a pile of bodies on the ground. His eyes scanned the grey world for anyone else before he surfaced.

Gaara followed inside quickly as Kakashi cautiously walked up to the two bodies lying on the ground. One was clad in the Akatsuki garb… the other in orange. He knelt down beside them and his uncovered

eye widened in surprise as he recognized the face of the Akatsuki member. Itachi Uchiha lay dead as empty eye sockets stared up at the ceiling. Kakashi felt an involuntary chill run up his spine. Who on earth could steal the eyes of one of the most powerful and feared ninja on the planet?

He pushed that thought to the back of his mind for a later time as his attention focused entirely on his student. Naruto was sprawled across the missing-nin's body like he had fallen there. His skin was deathly pale to the point that even the normally vibrant yellow hair seemed dull. The pale acted as if it consumed any color that came in contact with it. Kakashi picked the boy up slowly as he stared down sadly and Gaara walked up behind him. The red head didn't seem to know how to react to seeing his friend. The normally stoic face was marred by a myriad of emotions.

His face quickly went back to its normal passiveness, but a giant fist of sand smashed into the far wall angrily. Kakashi ignored him and just kept looking down at his student. He had never gotten to teach the boy like he had wanted to. To show that he really did care about Naruto's growth. To stop making the same mistakes time and again. With a controlled breath, he pulled Naruto over his shoulder… and froze as he felt a pair of lungs expand against his back. He waited for a moment, unsure if his grief had merely been toying with him. Then he felt it again.

He swung the blonde forward and checked for a pulse. It was a weak. The kind that made one wonder how it was even effective. His head snapped over to Gaara as he wrapped Naruto around his back. He ignored the sense of déjà vu that it brought. He mentally commanded the first gate to open as the Suna-nin looked at him curiously.

"He's alive Gaara, but weak. Destroy Itachi's body completely and head back with Shino. I'm going to get back to Konoha as fast as possible."

"We have been running for over sixteen hours at near full speed. You run a potentially fatal risk pushing yourself. I can tell you have begun the same technique that one green clad ninja used before."

Kakashi ignored him and zipped out of the cave. Gaara sighed as sand surged around the lifeless form of the Uchiha and swallowed the body. He clenched his fist and the sand compressed until absolutely nothing was left. The blood was absorbed into the sand and destroyed by his chakra. His turquoise eyes glanced around the cave one last time before he turned and started to walk out. He lifted his hand high into the air and sand lashed out at the walls of the cave… destroying the reminders of what occurred there.

Danzo sat poised on a stone in the middle of the forest. Despite the encounter with Itachi, his posture was still rigidly regal. He was near the edge of Fire Country… his home. As far as he was concerned, it would always be his home regardless of what people told him. He likened himself to the king exiled by a foreign conquer. It would take time, but he would return to free his people from that woman and her weak ideals. Konoha would soon realize that she would lead to their destruction, and he would be there to claim what was rightfully his as its savior.

He looked out upon the ninety-nine Root members that knelt before him. They had caught up to him and his two guards quickly. All trace of them from the village had been erased… including the fools that had been captured by Jiraiya. The recruitment cells had been emptied out and all but the strongest were eliminated. From there, the group had made a mass exodus. Yet, they had followed unquestioningly and their determination to follow him, Konohagakure's true leader, was stronger than ever. He tapped his cane on the ground and stood to his full height.

"Fu."

"Yes, my lord?" The guard to his right looked up from where he bowed.

"Orochimaru had a woman that assisted him in his experiments. Karin was her name I believe. Take two agents of your choice with you and bring her to our new base of operations."

"Tell me were she should be taken and it will be done sir."

"It is time that Orochimaru pays back all that I have done for him. We shall use Otogakure as our temporary stronghold until we can return to our true home. I am sure there are many resources that will provide beneficial assistance to our mission."

Pain sat quietly in the solitude at the top of his tower. Itachi's betrayal and Kakuzu's death had been problematic for the extraction. It would have taken nearly five days for the remaining members to pull the beast free of its host… if it had not been for the sudden release of the seal. He had been almost caught off guard when the beast had nearly flown from the boy's body into the statue. It had left him puzzled as to why, although it was irrelevant in the scope of things. They had the nine tailed beast. Now, they were only two shy… and then his plan could finally begin.

Kakashi's breathing was ragged as he leapt to another tree branch. His legs screamed for him to stop and his vision was starting to tunnel, but he continued to push forward. Twice the blonde's heart had stopped, and it had taken a low grade Raikiri to get it beating again. He knew it was a matter of time before it wouldn't work anymore. The breathing was getting even weaker as the minutes ticked by.

Why did it always rain when a Konoha-nin died? It was as if the sky itself was saddened each time one of the village lost its inhabitants. Hinata stared down quietly at Sakura's grave as her umbrella kept the raindrops from her. It was startling how quickly ninja were buried. The pink haired medic-nin hadn't been deceased for much longer than a day, but already, the funeral was over, and the grave was

placed amongst the hundreds of others. It was a peaceful spot… off to the side and hidden in the shade of the nearby forest.

Hinata had been working at the hospital during the service and just managed to finish her shift. She hadn't wanted to be around everyone else anyway… she wanted a chance to mourn in private. To have one last talk without anyone hearing her… a goodbye.

"You know, I was jealous of you many times Sakura-san." Hinata gripped her umbrella tighter. "You always had Naruto-kun's undivided attention without having to do anything. It made me so angry sometimes. But as I got older and trained with you, I realized that wasn't fair of me. You… you were amazing Sakura-san. How you could grasp medical techniques and then change them to fit any situation. There is no doubt in my mind you would have surpassed Tsunade-sensei."

Hinata took a shuttering breath and blinked as her eyes watered slightly.

"You showed such compassion towards patients and me. So much of my confidence and growth was because you would take the extra time to help me grasp that one aspect I missed. When I messed up and was chastised, you cheered me on. After a while, I started to see that I didn't have the right to be jealous. You worked hard for your teammates' sakes. You struggled so you could support them and that was something that I didn't understand at first. You helped me see that I didn't really know Naruto-kun. I originally saw him as a someone to admire… an ideal, but not him. However, working with you and listening to your well meaning complaints about him, showed me he did have flaws. You made him human to me… and someone I wanted to know better."

The tears dropped freely in silence as she stared down at the name written in the stone.

"Tsunade-sensei explained to me a little of what you said. I will do my best to be there for him. I… I just wanted to say thank you

Sakura-san. Thank you for being someone to look up to… th- thank you for being someone Naruto-kun cared about, and I promise I won't let you down."

Hinata gave a small bow and turned toward the exit. The rain slowly dying down.

Tsunade nearly leapt out of her chair when her assistant had slammed the doors to her office open. Even in her hazy state, she knew that particular look on Shizune's face. It was a look of desperation. When she had that look… it meant someone was on the edge of death, and there was a very poor chance of preventing it. The Slug Princess was silent as she moved quickly out of the room and towards the hospital.

"Report Shizune."

"Tsunade-sama, Kakashi Hatake has just returned. He is suffering from severe chakra depletion and numerous fractures on his feet."

Tsunade subconsciously increased the pace of her steps. Those were common symptoms during wartime. Ninja would sprint with everything they had to bring news from the battlefield. A feeling of dread washed over her. What had Kakashi found that forced him to do such a thing?

"Was Naruto with him?"

"Yes… he is in critical condition. Kakashi reported that they succeeded in the extraction. Somehow, he is still alive, but his breathing is poor and Kakashi said that his heart had stopped twice during the run here. Naruto has also sustained numerous critical injuries most likely from his battle prior to his capture."

"His body is struggling to adapt to not housing the Kyubi. How he is still alive is nothing short of a miracle. We'll need another one to keep him that way."

"Tsunade-sama… will… will he be okay?"

"I don't know until I look at him. However, I doubt he will be able to continue the life of a shinobi. His entire chakra system must look like a bomb went through it, and it has to be on the verge of collapse if it hasn't already." Tsunade shook the memories of her past off as they crept up in the back of her mind. "You take care of Kakashi. I will be dealing with Naruto personally."

Karin sat bored in the corner of an empty cell, her office as she called it. Orochimaru-sama hadn't come back after nearly a month and rumor had it that both he and Kabuto-sensei were dead. It didn't matter. She would remain guarding this prison until the day she died. Her lord had asked it of her, and she would not disappoint. Although… if it was true what they had said about Sasuke… then there was no longer any purpose for Oto.

Her eyes narrowed as she sensed three presences coming in quick from across the desert. They're chakra signatures weren't anything she had felt before. She frowned. Intruders were a pain and something that she really didn't want to deal with. Would it be smarter to escape or… yes escape would be best. She stood up, but felt a chill run up her spine. The center intruder had already noticed her presence. This wasn't good.

She bolted from her office and started racing down the halls. If she could get far enough away, she could hide herself. It would just take a little bit of distance. The halls shook as the intruders burst through the entrance at the far end of the compound. She didn't know why they were here. There was little in research notes, and the prisoners were just weaklings and experiment fodder. Her question was answered almost immediately as they went straight for her position.

Panic welled up in her chest and she ran faster. However, they caught her in a matter of seconds. She was sent crashing face first into the cement ground as two of them pinned her down in mid-run.

Her head twisted up angrily, and she stared through broken glasses at who she assumed to be the leader.

"Take her to our lord, I will burn this place to the ground," he said.

"Wait! The prisoners-," Karin struggled to stand up. She didn't care what happened to them normally because it served Orochimaru-sama, but burning alive without any escape was too cruel.

The man looked down at her from behind his mask and she repressed a shudder at his cold demeanor.

"No one must know we were here."

He brought his hands up in a tiger seal, and fire sprang to life on his finger tips.

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

I would like to thank everyone for their comments up to this point. They have given me some new ideas and hopefully improved my writing to some degree. The responses for last chapter were more varied than the others, but they were still very thoughtful. I was actually surprised how many people were more upset about Naruto's capture instead of the Sakura and Sasuke deaths. With the latter two, I was honestly nervous people would attribute their deaths to character bashing, which was not my intention. I was very glad to read that all of you thought I had given significance and thought to the characters… or at the very least made their actions understandable.

I hope that you enjoyed the chapter and will continue to do so in the future. There are a lot of twists and bad things coming down the way so be ready. I'm anxious to see how people will react to where I'm taking the story (sorry, don't mean to antagonize, just

excited/nervous). I should let you know now that the weeks of Christmas and New Years I will not be updating. Its been six years since I've had a real vacation so I am forcing myself to not do anything but play. I love writing, but I also pump out nearly fifty pages a week so it can be a little taxing.

Anyway, sorry for rambling. Let me know what you think on the main sites forums.

See you next week.

Receding Waters

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 11:

Two days… it had been two days since Sakura had died and Naruto had been captured. Within twenty-four hours, Sasuke and Itachi Uchiha were dead, Danzo had been expelled, and the Kyubi had been extracted. The rescue team had found Naruto in the afternoon of the same day, and Kakashi had returned with the severely weakened blonde two hours after midnight, before he collapsed unconscious himself. Tsunade had worked through the night before he finally stabilized. She finished at eight in the morning, just moments before the remaining two members of the rescue team returned. It had taken just two days for everything to go so horribly wrong.

Hinata clenched her fists as she fought the urge to twiddle her fingers. It was a habit she still occasionally fell back on when she was stressed… and stressed was definitely the word of the hour. The entire village seemed to be on edge, but no more so than the people in Lee's hospital room. Tsunade sipped the warm tea in her hand, as she rubbed the bags under her eyes away. Shizune busied herself by checking over Lee's chart for the millionth time, even if he was being released this afternoon… albeit under strict orders of rest. Jiraiya stared absently out the window while Shino, Shikamaru, and Gaara stood around the room quietly. Finally, Tsunade sighed and looked up at all of them.

"Naruto will be fine. However, it will take some time to see if he can ever be a ninja again… let alone as strong as he was."

"Tsunade-sensei, I know the fox was a source of power, but was it really so tightly crossed with Naruto-kun's own?" Hinata asked.

"It is not quite that simple. Yes, the Kyubi and Naruto's chakras were entirely separate. However, from what Jiraiya has explained to me, since birth, the Kyubi's chakra has been siphoned into Naruto's own base. To explain it simply, it is like using two hands to lift the same weight for many years and then only using one hand. Even though the arm is strong and capable of doing it, it still takes time to become accustomed to doing it by itself."

"If that is the case then why won't Naruto-kun recover fully?"

"It's his chakra system. Even though there isn't any less chakra than there was before, it is still trying to draw from two sources instead of one. The other problem is that the seal is still on Naruto's stomach."

Everyone in the room looked up in surprise at that statement. How was that possible? Hinata subconsciously started to fidget with her fingers. Were there still aspects of the Kyubi in his system? Jiraiya took a step forward as Tsunade took another sip.

"During a normal forced extraction the tailed beast is literally ripped through the seal, which effectively destroys it," Jiraiya said as he crossed his arms. "When I heard that Naruto still had a seal, I checked it out. It had been opened."

"Opened?" Gaara asked. "How does a seal open?"

"The Yondaime designed the seal like a gate. I can't fully explain it because honestly a lot of the seal is still a mystery. However, what I can tell you is that the seal was unlocked, and thus did not provide any form of resistance when the Kyubi was extracted. That is why Naruto is still alive."

"Does that mean Naruto-kun released the Kyubi on purpose?" Lee asked, but quickly waved his hands defensively. "I agree with him if

he did. It is better to save his life when the end result would have been the same."

"No." Jiraiya shook his head slowly. "Naruto does not have the knowledge to do so, and honestly he wouldn't be able to even if he did."

"Why?"

"Because to manipulate the seal you need the key, and I am the only one with that key."

"Regardless of how Jiraiya-san, how is it still providing a problem… and why do we not just remove it?" Gaara asked.

"The problem is the seal is designed to hold a Nine Tailed Beast worth of chakra. The cage is now empty and so is the chakra, which means it is collecting Naruto's own chakra to refill the cage. It can't be removed since I don't know the true complexity of the seal. If I tried to rip it out, it could kill him."

"What do we do then?" Hinata asked.

"I've got some ideas, but for now we wait and hope for the best."

A lone doctor tiredly rubbed his eyes before he gave the chart one last look over and placed it back in the door. Seals were something he could never truly wrap his head around. The body, despite all its secrets, was still straightforward by comparison. He started down the hall towards his next patient. One more and he could finally go home and sleep. He had been assisting the Hokage for the majority of the night. How they had succeeded still escaped him. Tsunade had done something, that medically speaking, was akin to bringing the dead back to life.

A nurse walked around from the corner and smiled at him.

"Afternoon doctor."

"Good afternoon." The doctor paused. "Nurse, I would like to make sure that we have someone posted on this floor at all times. Our most critical patient is here after all."

"You mean Naruto Uzumaki?" The nurse nodded slowly, but her brow scrunched up in concern. "I have no problem, but doctor… don't you hate him?"

The doctor sighed and started back down the hall.

"I can't bring myself to hate a boy who truly loves this village."

"I never thought I'd hear you call him anything but demon."

The doctor paused and turned around. His eyes looking down sadly. It was true, and he would not deny it. However, seeing the emotions that boy had evoked from people over the last few days had been eye opening. And the blonde's tears… they had washed away any doubt in his mind.

"No demon could fake the pure sorrow that boy held when he said his final goodbye to Haruno-san."

He left quietly and the nurse gave a small smile.

"It's about damn time you realized it doctor," he said under his breath and glanced out a window facing the village. "It seems that much of the village is of a similar sentiment."

The nurse disappeared in a puff of smoke and Sai came into view as the Henge dispelled. He drew a quick picture on the wall and pulled himself into it as he resumed his hidden guard duty.

"I wonder how you will react to the village's new expectations… Naruto."

Naruto slowly opened his eyes. The blurry and dull world that he had seen last time was gone. Now, it was a blurry world of lights and white. Was he dead? He tried to rub his eyes, but his arms wouldn't obey him, instead he blinked several times. His eyelids felt like Lee's weights, but slowly the world became clearer and the ceiling came into focus. He knew that ceiling… it belonged to Konoha's hospital. Relief washed over him as that thought repeated itself in his mind. He was home and alive… but what about…?

"Kyubi?" His voice was scratchy, but still managed to get across the sense of alarm he felt.

He struggled to sit up and nearly managed to before his muscles completely gave out. They had it. The Akatsuki had the fox and were one step closer to their goals. He had to get out of here and go after them. He had to-.

"Easy Naruto," a familiar voice called from his right. He turned his head and saw Kakashi sitting in a bed with his nose buried in his perverted orange book.

"Kakashi-sensei the Kyubi."

"I know Naruto, don't worry about that." Naruto went to argue, but Kakashi interrupted him. "For now, work on getting healed up."

"But, it's my fault. They have it because I got caught. I… I was stupid."

"Saving a fellow nin's life is stupid? I thought that was admirable."

"But-."

"It will be okay Naruto."

Naruto clenched his eyes shut. It wouldn't be okay. The vast emptiness he felt because of Kyubi's absence was easily recognizable. It wasn't the fox itself. It was its power. Naruto could

feel just how much of it was gone, and it scared him. Nothing short of another Kyubi could stop that degree, that potency of raw chakra.

"I have to get out of here Kakashi-sensei. It's my responsibility to deal with this, not the villages."

"We each have our parts, and a lot of people are going to place their faith in you. However, you can't do that in your current state. It's your mission to rest for now."

"… Okay."

"He's right gaki." Naruto turned his head towards the door as Jiraiya walked in. "You can't be slacking off now. Although, you have an opportunity you shouldn't pass up. I give you permission to have one of the female nurses or med-nins give you a sponge bath." A wicked grin crossed his face as he placed a hand on his chin in thought. "Hey… that Hinata girl is pretty cute."

Naruto shot straight up as an intense blush spread across his face.

"You damn pervert can't you think of anything else for a single second!"

A wave of vertigo hit him, and he wobbled dazedly for a moment before he fell backwards unconscious.

Jiraiya laughed voraciously as he held his sides. It started softly, but began to grow, and soon even Kakashi was chuckling softly. For minutes, the infectious laughter echoed through the halls of the hospital. The kind that caused other people to smile just from hearing it. It was a laugh of relief and pure joy. Slowly it stopped, and Jiraiya let out a sigh. The old man walked over and looked down at the boy as a smile remained pasted to his face.

"You're really happy to see him safe aren't you Jiraiya-san?" Kakashi asked as he looked over at the man.

Jiraiya's smile dissipated and he shook his head in a fake show of annoyance.

"Bah, I've just put in too much time to see him waste it by dying."

"If you say so."

"You still want to teach him Kakashi?"

The copy-nin almost dropped his book as he turned wide eyed to the Sannin.

"What do you-?"

"I've got to check some things out on my end to try and help Naruto get back to where he was. It could be several months, and he'll need a teacher to get him back on his feet, and more importantly, used to his new limitations. If you want to train him for his own sake and not some old promise, would you be interested?"

"Yes, I would. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." Jiraiya grinned. "The gaki is a pain in the ass."

Danzo watched impassively as two more of his agents were sent flying backwards through the walls. It didn't matter. He had more than enough recruits to currently fill the slots of his hundred agent requirement. The rest would then be eliminated or put back into the newly re-constructed recruitment cells. One hundred agents were the perfect number. They were a large enough force to complete a wide array of missions, but small enough to manage easily. Another agent was blasted backward and a vicious roar caused sediment to rain down from the fractures in the walls and ceiling.

He calmly pulled down the bandage and revealed his diseased Sharingan as the massive cursed beast charged toward him. The top of his cane snapped open with a pulse of chakra and he pulled out

his katana. It was his most prized possession after the Sharingan. Hand crafted by one of the greatest smiths to come out of the elemental countries and his sole companion and salvation for many of his missions, it was something that was second only to the legendary blade Kusanagi.

The beast was almost upon him, but he flickered out of existence effortlessly. He reappeared behind the beast as its arms and legs fell away from it. It collapsed with a pained growl as his wrist flicked the blood off of his blade. He turned back to the defeated creature as it slowly reverted back to its human form. Danzo pulled the bandage back over the eye and hid his sword back in its cane sheath as grey armor gave way to orange hair. The creature, now man, flipped onto his back.

"Please… please kill me. I beg you."

"Kill you Jugo? No, I have a great many uses for you."

"I'm a monster, and I'll end up killing you."

The man's voice lacked the hard edge of a threat or warning. Rather, it was a plea. A trick to scare his opponent into ending his life.

"I do not disagree that you are a monster. But, I have need of a monster to destroy my enemies." Danzo turned to the members of Root picking themselves out of the rubble. "Take him back to the main base. Once he is secure, begin experimentation."

Jugo's pleas fell on deaf ears as he was picked up and dragged from the broken halls.

Naruto munched on his food slowly. His entire mouth still felt like he was chewing pins and needles. In truth, his entire body felt like it was constantly tingling. Sometimes it was painful, but mostly just annoying. It didn't help that everything tasted like cardboard and that he felt like Gamabunta had sat on him… and farted… twice. Baa-

chan had said it would pass eventually. He couldn't wait, although he felt so weak most of the time, he couldn't bring himself to care.

His lips dipped into a frown. He knew he should be thankful to just be alive, but they had made it clear his recovery was going to be tough, and possibly fruitless. It had been almost a full week and he was still mostly bed ridden. The Kyubi's healing ability was something that he had taken for granted. Although, everyone was surprised that he still healed faster than normal… just not instantaneously. It may have been impressive for them, but for him, it was like he wasn't healing at all. He shoved another mouthful of whatever slop the hospital gave him into his mouth. There was so much he needed to do, and so many questions he had to ask.

His attention was stolen away as the door to his room cracked open and a familiar bowl haircut appeared. Lee walked in slowly with a blinding smile, and Naruto couldn't help but smile back. Bushy brows looked like he was alright. He was glad. The guy had been pretty beat up when he had found him. It didn't help that he had been rather short with his friend's recklessness.

"Good morning Naruto-kun, how are you feeling?"

"I'll be back up before you know it." Naruto ignored how tiring it was for him to pump his fist in the air. "You look like you are doing okay."

"Yes, I am still sore and I am restricted to light stretching only, but I should be back to full strength by next week."

"That's awesome Lee."

Naruto looked back down at the slop and forced down another mouthful. If it didn't kill him it would make him stronger right? Lee chuckled, and Naruto assumed it was because of the face he made.

"Naruto-kun, I am glad you are safe." Lee gave a shallow bow. "Thank you for rescuing me."

Naruto took one more serving of slop before he tossed down his spoon in disgust. He cast a forced glare at his friend.

"That was stupid to chase after Sasuke… but, I did the same thing so it would be wrong to be mad at you for that." Naruto grinned. "I've got to say where you guys fought was trashed. I kind of wished I had seen it."

"I'm sorry if you wanted to fight Sasuke. I was selfish and didn't want you to hav-."

"It's okay. Sakura needed me, and we couldn't let him get away. Thank you for cleaning up my mess."

"Naruto-kun, you shouldn't-."

The door opened again and Hinata walked in pushing a wheelchair.

"Hello Lee-kun, Naruto-kun."

"Hinata, how have you been?" Naruto asked as his mood subconsciously perked up. "Did you manage to get into the apartment? Oh crap, I never got around to cleaning it. I'm sorry Hinata."

"It's okay Naruto-kun, I'm sure you would have gotten to it if you could have." She gave him a kind smile. "Besides, I cleaned it up as a thank you for letting me stay with you."

Naruto winced as he noticed Lee's smile threaten to split his face. He had to repress a shudder when he looked at that smile. Buried deep within it was a mischievous and cruel thought. Seeing it on the normally innocent boy was absolutely terrifying.

"Yosh! Naruto-kun, your youthfulness in giving Hinata-san a home is most wonderful! I must go and shout praises of your kindness to the village. I pray that you two build the happiest of homes!"

Naruto paled as Hinata tried desperately not to invent a new shade of red. Lee gave an energetic nod and turned to leave.

"No, Lee wait!" Naruto weakly reached out as the green clad ninja left. "Neji will kill me!"

His head hung in a mix of defeat and exhaustion as Hinata shook her head to regain her composure. She pushed the chair up to him and smiled again. He tilted his head to the side as a confused look crossed his face.

"Tsunade-sensei says you need some fresh air, especially since you are going to begin your training with Kakashi-san in a few days."

Naruto slowly pushed himself out of the bed and dropped into the chair. Baa-chan had explained that the main problem he had was his chakra system had to get reoriented. She explained that training would be the best and quickest method to recovery. He still didn't have a clue as to how that would happen when he couldn't walk more than twenty steps, but hey, she knew what she was talking about. He hoped.

"So where are we headed Hinata?"

"If it's okay with you, I wanted to take you to see… to see Sakura-san."

Naruto's breath got caught in his throat, but he nodded in agreement.

"Let's go then."

Jiraiya listened absently to the soothing sound of the sacred falls deep in Myobokuzan. He had decided to come here for his research about Naruto. It was partially so he could keep his focus strictly on this specific form of research, but mostly it was for security. The information he was studying was so integral and dangerous to

Naruto that even a glimpse could lead to serious ramifications. It was why the scrolls Minato had left him were always kept with the toads, since this area was the most well hidden spot in the world.

His eyes roamed over the piles of pages and notes again. He had decided that before he tried to fix Naruto's seal, he needed to understand how it had been unlocked in the first place. There was little doubt it was a fail safe, but how that aspect of the seal worked was a mystery. None of the notes he had found mentioned anything about it. Could Minato have come up with it in the process of the sealing? It wouldn't be that surprising given his late student's knack for coming up with genius solutions from thin air. The fact that he could even use a seal no one understood was remarkable.

Jiraiya leaned back and looked up at the clear sky. Minato… the depths of his ingenuity was something that few could even fathom. The idea of using two seals, and actually splitting the Kyubi's chakra was unbelievable. Two seals… wait a moment. He leaned forward again and flipped through the pages as an epiphany shot through his mind. The Nine Tails' chakra was divided into two equal parts. If he were to access the other half… Naruto could theoretically regain everything he lost. In fact, the fox's spirit would be gone from before so it could no longer interfere. Naruto could become even stronger.

A large grin threatened to split his face as he found the particular parchment that he wanted. The Shiki Fujin was something that no one truly understood. It was a technique that he doubted even Minato knew a fraction about. It was something that supposedly had ties to the Rikudo Sennin, a man no one was sure even existed. However, Jiraiya knew that if he could just figure out a little bit more about it, then Naruto would reap the benefits.

For the briefest of moments, Naruto wondered if he was truly dead, and what he was experiencing was a dream. As Hinata pushed him through Konoha's streets, he had anticipated a normal trek through the village. Maybe an extra excuse me, or a curious glance in his direction, but he had not been expecting what was occurring.

The people were saying hello. They were asking how he was doing. They were giving him condolences for his teammates. They were almost… happy to see him? The other odd thing was several people seemed to be shocked by his appearance. A couple mumbled about how his untamed hair reminded them about someone. It wasn't his fault it was a mess. Baa-chan hadn't given him his head band back yet. What was worse was that several women had pointed and smiled at him discreetly… which had caused the temperature around Hinata to drop several hundred degrees. Given her close proximity to him and the fact she was controlling his chair, left a sense of insecurity within him.

What the hell was going on? Hinata gave a soft giggle as his face scrunched up in confusion.

"There has been a lot of talk about you lately Naruto-kun." Hinata pushed him around the next corner. He could spot the open cemetery up ahead.

"Why?"

"Your accomplishments since your return have drawn a lot of attention. And… they were all worried about you."

Naruto paled slightly and he glanced back at Hinata as panic danced in his eyes.

"Do they know about… the fox?"

"Some do, but I'm not sure about the younger ones. It doesn't matter. They are seeing you as one of their own and recognizing you."

"Why so suddenly?"

"It really hasn't been sudden. You have been the talk of the village for the past month. The fact that the Hyuga are praising you for assisting me in helping them, and that you behaved very humanly

with Sakura-san and Sasuke, has made them realize what many of your friends have known for a long time."

"And that is?"

Hinata leaned down a little closer to him. He did not fail to notice his heart rate picked up slightly at the innocent action. However, why his heart rate did so was something he couldn't figure out.

"That you are one of the kindest people in Konoha, and they are lucky to have you."

Naruto grinned embarrassedly as a feeling of pride and gratitude stirred within him. He remembered back when he first joined Team Seven and how he had boasted that people would recognize him. If what Hinata had said was true, then he was one step closer to accomplishing it. His grin faltered slightly as they stopped in front of one particular stone. He just wished that his original team was there to see it.

He stared down at the stone with his one time crush's name on it. Yet, he kept a small smile up at all times. It was both for Sakura's sake as well as his. She had asked for him to be happy, and he would do everything in his power for that to be the case. It was his responsibility to live on for his team. Besides, he couldn't be moping when Akatsuki was so much closer to their goals. Konoha would need him back on his feet… and his new team would need his full support.

"It's a nice spot," he said as he looked around at the almost garden like area the stone rested in. Ino must have been busy. "Hinata… do you mind if I have a moment alone?"

She nodded with an understanding smile and made her way off to the other side of the grounds. He watched her go for a moment before he turned his attention back to the stone.

"Hey Sakura-chan… I won't keep you for long. I just wanted to let you know that I made it back home safe, and everyone is taking really good care of me. I hear Ino has really stepped up in taking over your hours at the hospital, and has really gotten serious about medicine." He chuckled lightly before he looked up at the sky. "I hope that Sasuke… the good part of him, is with you wherever you are… and that you are kicking his ass straight."

His eyes widened for a second as a thought popped into his mind. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a scratched Konoha headband. His eyes stared down at it sadly for a moment before he leaned forward and draped it over her stone.

"It was Sasuke's. I've held onto it for all these years, and always had it on me when there was a chance we were going to save him. I wanted to hand it back to him as a welcome back gift." Naruto smiled. "Do me a favor and give it to him for me after you teach him a lesson."

He discreetly looked over his shoulder at the direction Hinata had gone. He spotted her kneeling in front of a grave that's name he couldn't make out. His smile grew and he looked back at Sakura's stone.

"You'd probably beat me up for this, but Hinata's living with me now. We haven't really had a chance to be roommates yet, but a part of me is kind of nervous about it. I… I'm not really sure of what I think about her, and it's kind of confusing. Just do me a favor, if I'm going to do something that will mess whatever we have up, reach out from the afterlife and give me one of your punches."

He gripped the wheels of the chair and turned away from the stone.

"Hey Hinata! Let's go get some Ramen!"

Danzo had to fight the urge to smile at his own genius. He was not a man prone to needless self praise. Any of his abilities or

achievements were merely a symbol that he was right… a validation as it were. However, this time he had exceeded even his own expectations. Orochimaru had, as suspected, done much more with the resources supplied to him than originally planned. The missing-nin had dozens of prisons, experimental labs, and hidden bases. What had been surprising though were the hundreds if not thousands of troops the snake had amassed and kept secret.

Danzo had found his army. With his own Root agents providing an unwavering police force, Danzo had gained control rather quickly of the confused Oto-nins. It had merely taken the revelation that Orochimaru was dead, and the removal of a few protesters' heads, to gain the loyalty of Otogakure in its entirety. Now, it was only a matter of preparing his troops for battle.

A gasp turned his attention back to the matter at hand. The woman known as Karin seemed to be rather frightened of the monster Jugo's current disposition. He supposed to the weak hearted, the masses of tubes and seals that adorned the limbless orange haired man must seem freakish. However, it was merely the fastest means of draining his blood, while keeping him alive and suppressed. Jugo's blood was a precious resource that was desperately needed after all.

Orochimaru had been incorrect of his usage of his cursed seals. The Sannin had crafted the mark so that it would select only the strongest of ninja. It was a pointless waste of manpower. A diluted form of the seal could work on any ninja, while still providing a significant boost in their abilities. Certainly, the increase would not be as pronounced as Orochimaru's seals, but the overall increase to his army's strength would be well worth the weaker seal.

His lone eye drifted down toward the orange haired man. Jugo appeared to be in a great deal of pain as his bones poked through his pale skin. It was a sign of the intense dehydration that accompanied the blood loss. He wasn't concerned. The seals would keep the man alive for the time being. He turned his attention over to the woman. Her eyes were nearly swollen shut from the beatings

that his men had administered. She had been surprisingly resilient to physical pain, and more annoyingly, his Sharingan. He had little doubt Orochimaru had something to do with that.

"Do you still refuse to tell me the location of Orochimaru's private records?" Danzo asked. She glared up at him angrily. "I assure you that our current treatment of you has been merely a precursor to what real interrogation is."

"I told them I don't know."

"I have my agents scouring every one of your master's facilities. They will find them that is a fact. However, I would prefer to not waste the time. Therefore, for every moment my men are forced to search, so to will the length and intensity of your torture."

"You'll just kill me anyway so there isn't any point."

"I have yet to decide such, but understand death is merely a sanctuary child. I can keep you far from its peaceful embrace." Danzo turned to one of his men. "Orochimaru often laced false research with genuine. Take what notes we have found and begin testing them on her." He stared down at her. "Perhaps enduring a few of his cruel traps will help encourage her cooperation."

Karin's swollen eyes widened in fear and she started to struggle against her captors. They dragged her off as she pleaded for his mercy. He turned away as the door to the lab shut. The first lesson of interrogation was to never give anyone more than one chance before following through with punishment. It helped condition cooperation with the subject. The balancing act of compassion and cruelty dictated the effectiveness of the interrogation… and he was a master of balancing his actions.

Hinata entered Tsunade's office quietly and shut the door behind her. The blonde Hokage looked up momentarily from her attack on her paperwork before she grinned and pushed herself away from the

table. Shizune looked down sadly at the massive stack of papers in her arms.

"Tsunade-sama," the assistant cried.

"We'll take a small break Shizune."

"But we started only three minutes ago."

"Break Shizune." Tsunade ignored her assistant's pitiful whimper and turned to Hinata. "How's the brat doing?"

"His enthusiasm is almost back to normal. I think the ramen helped."

Tsunade cast a sly glance up and down at the girl.

"I think it was more than just the ramen."

Hinata blushed and looked away.

"D-do you w-want me to accompany him on his training sessions with Kakashi-san?"

"No, he will be fine. Physically, he is healthy aside from the high degree of weakness he feels. I need you to start training with your new team. Shikamaru has been coming up with different strategies to utilize your individual abilities to the fullest. I would say he is excited about the potential your team has. Well, excited if it wasn't Shikamaru."

"Shouldn't we be waiting for Naruto-kun's recovery?"

"We can't be sure when that will be, or if that will even happen. Besides, the brat is pretty simple to fit in to any plan and Shikamaru has worked with him before. The same can't be said for the rest of you. As the tactician of your team, he needs to be aware of what all of you can do."

Hinata hid her frown to the best of her ability. While she agreed about Naruto-kun, she still didn't like that he was being left behind. However, it was more a selfish matter on her part. She had spent so many years hiding her blossoming abilities. She wasn't sure if she was ready to reveal them yet.

"I know you are concerned about your eyes Hinata. However, they already saw that you are wearing contacts. It seems pointless to keep hiding them."

"I suppose Sensei."

"How are they adjusting anyway?"

"They still hurt occasionally."

Tsunade frowned and got up from her chair.

"Let me look."

Hinata sighed and removed the Byakugan styled contacts. Her normal lavender irises looked up at her teacher.

"You know those new eyes of yours look very beautiful Hinata-chan," Shizune said as she walked up. "They are very intense, but gentle looking. I'm sure it would take a certain ninja's voice if he really had a chance to see them."

Hinata blushed more intensely and attempted to look down, but Tsunade forced her to keep her head up. The Hokage frowned.

"You haven't tried to utilize them yet have you?"

Hinata looked down in shame.

"No Sensei, I have been hesitant to activate them to their fullest."

"Why?"

"I am not sure if that's what my mo-… mother had intended."

"You're having second thoughts."

"No! No, I want to use them, but I'm afraid of what will happen once I do. Everything up until this point has been theoretical, and even if it works, what if… what if it produces the same negative side effects of the Uchiha's Mangekyo?"

"I'm hearing nothing but excuses Hinata. What's done is done and it is time to make use of your mother's ideas." Tsunade reached out and snatched the contacts from the younger girl's hands. "We'll start with making you get those pretty eyes out there for everyone to see."

She crushed the contacts in her fist and Hinata frowned. It was long past time for her to make use of her mother's gift. The question was… could she handle it?

Shikamaru shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, any more so and he would probably rip the seam. Choji had a grim look on his face, and a bag of chips left untouched hanging out of his back pocket. Both of them were nervous and more than a little reluctant to be doing this. They were going to talk to Ino about Sakura. It was something that both of them were sure would not go over well.

Sakura's and Sasuke's deaths had hit their teammate hard. Shikamaru frowned slightly, ex-teammate was the more correct term. Regardless, she had thrown herself into working at the hospital, and ate and slept enough just to keep her functioning. It had been a week now, and they were beginning to believe it was going beyond mourning. However knowing Ino, she would not take their interference well.

With an annoyed groan, he stopped in front of the door of her house. Her father had said she would be around for an hour or two before her next hospital shift. Shikamaru had refrained from telling him that he had cancelled the girl's shift and that she had the day off. Choji

grabbed the door handle and walked in before Shikamaru could consider wandering off. He was really only here for moral support. Choji was better at handling stuff like this… especially when it came to Ino.

Ino bounded down the stairs and nearly ran into the rounder man. She gave an annoyed growl and glared up at him.

"Move out of the way Choji, I've got to go to work."

"Ino," Choji's said as his grim stare softened to a more compassionate one. "Let's sit down and talk for a little bit okay. We're worried about you."

"I'm fine."

"Try to be at least a little less troublesome than usual Ino," Shikamaru said as he stepped in and shut the door behind him. "We already cancelled your shift so you have the day off."

Her face went blank in surprise, but quickly contorted up into and angry scowl.

"What the hell do you think-?"

"Ino." Choji's voice contained the usual gentle tone it always did, but this time. There was an edge to it. Not a harsh one, but a commanding one. The kind that gave no room for argument. "Please sit down."

"Are you sure about this Hinata?"

"Yes, Naruto-kun."

"There's no going back after this you know."

"I know, but we have to do this."

"Alright, here goes nothing."

Naruto winced and clicked his stove top on as if it might literally explode in death and destruction. He had faced down enraged women, super powerful criminals, and had spent years attempting to tame the most powerful entity in existence. However, there was one foe he had never dared attempted to defeat… cooking. And judging from Hinata's similar disposition, he could assume that she was as lost and apprehensive as he was.

They had decided that now that they were living together they would split the responsibilities of cleaning and meals. The problem was that Naruto's culinary expertise was firmly planted in instant ramen. It was simple enough for him to understand and quick to put on. Besides, the old man at the Ichiraku's kept an interesting enough assortment of ramen dishes it never got boring. He could also make scrambled eggs… barely.

However, that wouldn't do with another person living with him. It didn't help that Hinata had stated that as heiress she was never allowed near a kitchen. Something about labor being beneath her or some other crap.

So they had grabbed and assortment of foods, a pan, and a small simple cook book. They went home and had thrown it all together easily enough. Then, they had stared at the assembled dish as nervous tension smothered the air. It had taken them five minutes to summon the courage to start cooking.

A simultaneous sigh of relief escaped them as the food started to cook. Naruto leaned against the table and fought to hide any outward signs of exhaustion. Just standing was taking an unbelievable amount of willpower from him. It was troublesome as Shikamaru would say.

"Well, that wasn't so bad eh Hinata?"

"No it wasn't," she said with a small smile. She turned to the stove and started to stir the dish. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it smelled good so he didn't care. "This is kind of fun cooking like this."

"Yeah it is, we'll be professional chefs in no time!"

"I- I meant the two of us cooking together."

Naruto paused and blinked in confusion for a moment, before a happy smile stretched from ear to ear.

"Yeah it is. I think I can get used to having a roommate." He scratched the back of his head nervously. Why the hell was he nervous all of a sudden? Stupid extraction probably screwed up his emotions as well. Great, he could be physically and emotionally a wreck. He shook his head and focused back on the conversation at hand. "Especially since you're my closest friend,"

Hinata seemed to trip over something and barely caught the pan and it contents. Man, the stove must be really hot for her to look so red.

"Naruto-kun, the cookbook said we should add some spices as we cook. Where did you put them?"

"Right above you in the cupboard."

Hinata opened it up and froze as several pieces of paper fell out onto the pan. She packed away slowly as one of them fell directly on the flame and started to hiss.

"Naruto-kun… why did you put exploding tags in the cupboard?"

"Oh that's where I put them!" Naruto didn't notice the smoking paper as he rambled on. "I didn't have enough ramen cups to fill it so I put some of my experimental tags up their out of the way."

Hinata looked at him nervously.

"Ex- experimental… as in the kind that almost blew you up?"

"What no, these are low grade ones. I made them to see if I could decrease the three minute waiting period for rame-."

He was cut off as Hinata tackled him over the table. The tag went off with a forceful pop, and gobs of vegetables and their dinner exploded out across the kitchen. Naruto blinked in surprise as food rained down around him. Maybe keeping the tags near fire wasn't his best idea. He frowned. Dinner was ruined now, just perfect. And after they had worked so hard on it.

He glanced down at Hinata who had a look of perturbed disbelief on her face as she looked up at him. He cracked a nervous grin and it quickly turned to laughter as a blob of soy sauce landed squarely on the top of her head. She fought for a moment to retain an indignant glare, but steadily a grin fought its way to her face and she joined in his laughter.

It grew louder until both were laughing until their sides hurt. Naruto couldn't remember if he had ever felt this… this content in his life. For a moment his worries seemed to fade and it was just him and Hinata laughing in their home. Looking back, he hadn't realized how absorbed in the happy scenario he had been. If he had been more aware, then most definitely, most surely, he wouldn't have kissed her.

And he didn't doubt that had she not been in the same state. She wouldn't have returned it.

END SECTION ONE

Authors Notes:

So here it is the end of the first section. I didn't originally plan for the story to have actual sections, but this seemed like an ideal spot to do so.

Which brings me to my next point, I will be taking a break for the remainder of December, and resume on Jan 9th. I didn't want to do

this originally, but after re-reading the next chapter, I realized it is going to take a lot of work to fix. It's bad folks. The kind of bad that makes you question why in God's name you ever thought you could be a writer. The ideas are good, but the delivery and lack of tension/emotional depth are beyond poor. Given the fact that it contains multiple important plot points and sets the story up for what is to come, I really need to nail it well. Honestly, the entire story hinges on these next few chapters.

However, by the time I get done with them, I'll probably have beefed it up enough that the single chapter will be two-three chapters. I promise that if you can grant me some patience you will not be disappointed. In fact, I hope to blow everything that has happened up to this point completely out of the water. I don't mean to talk big, but this is what gave me the idea for the story in the first place (I have a habit of coming up with end of my stories, before most of it). I'm really excited about it, and when I share it with you I want you to be just as excited.

So now that I've probably shot myself in the foot, I'll see you on Jan. 9th and see if I can back up what I promise.

Have a Merry Christmas or a great whatever holiday you celebrate, and a Happy New Year.

Storm

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 13:

Damnable idiot, what had he been thinking in kissing her? They were friends and just starting to be roommates, and he had probably screwed it up beyond repair. The fact that he still couldn't exactly explain to himself why he kissed her didn't help either. His mind had been so consumed by the contentment. He had felt that he'd acted on pure instinct. Instinct… the one thing that shouldn't have any place in an emotional relationship… right? How could he have been so stupid? To make matters worse, after they had kissed she ran off like a cat that had been dunked in ice water. Of course, his current condition made it impossible for him to go after her and explain his actions… not that he would have a damn clue what to explain.

Screw thinking, he had more immediate issues to deal with.

Naruto forced himself to stand tall even as the gentle breeze that swept across the training field threatened to knock him over. He scowled. The damn training better work quick because the entire super weak thing was getting old. His eyes kept themselves locked straight ahead. Yet, he could not ignore the fact that this was Team Seven's field, that the log he had been tied to was just on his right, and that he was the last one alive. Pushing the thoughts aside, he focused over on Kakashi, who was slowly putting his book away. The copy-nin had showed up on time… surprisingly. It gave Naruto an unexpected chill. Hell had definitely frozen over, and the gravity of the situation was more severe than he had realized.

"How are you doing Naruto?"

Kakashi's voice was pleasant as usual, but Naruto could detect a hint of something behind it. It was implacable, but it put him on edge. However, he wasn't going to be discouraged by a paranoid feeling.

"I'm ready to go Kakashi-sensei!"

Kakashi's eye curved up into its familiar smile.

"Glad to hear it."

The silver haired ninja's hands came together lightning fast. The fingers blurred amongst each other as the jonin started to whip through a series of hand seals. Naruto gulped as the stream behind him started to bubble, his foot subconsciously stepping backwards in preparation to flee.

"Eh… Ka- Kakashi-sensei?"

"Suiton: Suiryudon no Jutsu!"

Naruto screamed in terror as a massive water dragon erupted out of the water and raced straight forward. He dove to the side barely in time to dodge the beast's jaws. His head snapped to the side. The hair stood up on the back of his neck as some kind of lightning dog ran straight for him. He scrambled onto his feet and quickly summoned a clone to take the impact of the beast. The clone barely formed in enough time, and Naruto noticed how poorly it turned out. It would have barely had enough time to sustain itself even if the lightning attack hadn't struck it.

Kakashi appeared through the smoke and lashed out with a bone breaking kick. Naruto blocked with a grunt as his arm went numb from the impact. This weakness was an absolute pain. He grit his teeth as he dodged another kick. What the hell kind of training was this? Ero-sensei had pushed him before, but this was different. This was a real fight. Kakashi was attacking him without remorse, and Naruto didn't doubt that if he messed up the outcome would be fatal.

He snarled as he rolled under another kick. If that was how it was going to be then so was any restraint he would have. With as much force as he could muster, he pushed his chakra into his feet… and exploded off the ground in a crazed spiral.

He could only yell as his body spun around like a ragdoll in a twister, before harshly crashing in the cool water. His vision swam as it tried to reorient itself. Okay, his chakra control had gone to hell beyond anything he had ever experienced. And, he was already exhausted enough it was difficult to keep his eyes open. It didn't help that Kakashi-sensei had decided to go all out in his… training. Come on, think! Shunshin and Rasengan were definitely out given the level of control necessary to-.

The familiar red eyes of the water dragon appeared in the corner of his vision. He gulped and it lunged. His mind raced over what he could do, but his mind just kept going over his limitations and what he probably couldn't or shouldn't do. However, as the thing inched rapidly closer. A sense of determination welled up in him and calm followed close behind. His eyes narrowed and he pushed his chakra around him to form a shell.

Screw it.

His Shunshin pulled him up out of the water and high into the air. The dragon chased him out in a violent surge of water and foam. He stretched his palm out and forced the Rasengan to form. His palm shook and the orb was barely stabilized when he flung his arm towards the liquid apparition. It connected with a massive boom. The dragon was blown apart in a huge splash.

Naruto gave one last triumphant grin as he started to fall back to the ground… and he slipped into unconsciousness.

One Week Later:

The tranquility of night came to Konohagakure as its inhabitants slowly wound down from their busy lives. Like shadows, two figures made their way silently in the village's cemetery. The tension in the air clearly gave notice to their distress. Almost timidly, they walked up to one of the four stone doors that were carved into the mountain side at the far end. Anyone having the rare privilege of letting their eyes rest upon the precious stone could tell these doors were special. They were the impenetrable barrier that held the bodies of the fallen village leaders. Vaults, which held the greatest powers and secrets of the village.

"I don't like this Jiraiya," Tsunade said as they paused at one particular door.

"I feel the same way hime, but this is really the only thing I can think of."

"You've only been researching for a week. More time may reveal something else."

"I've gone over every note, scroll, and scrap of paper dozens of times. I need to really see the seal itself… which means Minato's body."

Tsunade sighed and bit her thumb. She raced through several hand seals and pressed her bloody palm against the smooth white stone. A glowing seal appeared around her hand and she felt something prodding her mind. It was looking for proof that she had the right to open the vault… that she was the Hokage. The door shuddered before it swung open slowly.

"It's more spacious than I thought it would be," Jiraiya said as he looked down the dark stairs.

"Be serious Jiraiya, the tombs of the Hokages are only supposed to be opened if the fate of the village is at risk. The secrets that are buried in their bodies are best left forgotten."

"Well, if we don't get Naruto back in shape then the village will be at risk."

"I know, but this is still something to be done with the utmost caution and reverence. Could you imagine if we discovered how Minato performed the Hiraishin, and then the formula was stolen by another village?"

"I know hime, I know. I wouldn't be asking if I wasn't completely sure there wasn't another way." He made his way down the steps as a series of torches lit the way down. "I still don't know how Orochimaru managed to get into the Shodaime's vault to extract his genetic makeup."

"I believe he managed to trick Sensei into showing him it at one point. I would prefer to not think about it though."

"Sure." The stairs stopped and Jiraiya made his way to the far end of the small cavern. His eyes rested upon a body lying upon an ornate stone slab and they widened. "What the hell?"

Hinata meditated deep within the forest that housed the numerous training grounds. She did not want to be disturbed until she had summoned the courage to activate her new eyes. New eyes… it wasn't a completely accurate term. They were her regular eyes, but due to her own chakra manipulation, and Tsunade-sensei's medical alterations, they weren't the Byakugan any longer. She frowned and gripped the edge of her coat tighter.

Her explanation to her teacher hadn't been completely honest. Part of her hesitance was due to her eyes being the last link to her family. It was foolish. She was exiled, and the changes to her eyes had been made. Yet, it was akin to taking the last step before jumping off a cliff… a completion of the journey that started with her mother's journal.

It had been several months after the conversation she had overheard between her father and the Elder. It had taken a few removed floor boards and a hand dug tunnel under the compound to the clan head's private library, but she had managed to gain access to her father's personal notes. Generations of teachings from the strongest of the Hyuga. Theories, techniques, training methods… she had spent months memorizing and refining what she found. It was then she realized just how stagnant that the clan had become. The fact that none of these things were ever truly realized beyond parchment was ridiculous. However, it was what allowed her to progress so far… and turn the Juken style on its head.

It had been on her last day in the library when she had found a thin notebook wedged deep behind the shelves. It had been a complete accident, and had it not been for her shifting the floorboards the opposite direction than she always had, she never would have found it. Whether it was fate or coincidence, she didn't know. The handwriting was something that she recognized immediately. It was her mother's elegant printing, and it described something that was beyond treasonous. The hidden journal described, in explicit and calculated detail, how to artificially evolve the Byakugan.

She remembered at how terrified and yet amazed she had been as she read it. By the time she was half way through, she had been sold on making it happen. It had taken another year of building up courage to approach Tsunade-sensei about becoming an apprentice… and another one to ask for her help with the eyes.

With a deep breath, her eyes snapped open. She pushed chakra into her new eyes and gasped. To a bystander, it would seem as if nothing had happened. However to Hinata, the world changed dramatically. She could see everything around her in a complete sphere. Below, above, even completely behind was all in her field of vision… and the familiar colorless palate that accompanied the Byakugan was gone. The same vivid colors of her regular vision were still there, and she could see it all even in the darkness of the

night. Faint glows of chakra and energy from the forest danced in her sight, it was almost as if she could see the wind itself.

A small smile tugged at her lips. This, coupled with the training she had put her other senses through, would guarantee complete awareness in her sphere of influence. She deactivated them quickly. Her vision returned to normal instantly. A sense of pride pounded in her chest. They appeared to be working perfectly, and her mother had properly accounted for the new limitations that the eyes created.

She stood and stretched. Her new eyes were far from all powerful. In some ways, they were less effective than the original Byakugan. She could see everything in a perfect sphere, but only ten feet around her. The world outside her sphere might as well not exist. They could still gain the long distance like her original doujutsu, but only if she looked in a specific direction.

She had essentially become the master of her area, but at the same time, she was caged within it. Everything she saw was unmatched in detail, but the limited scope added the risk of being caught off guard. She would have to be faster than her opponent in order to make full use of the extra field of vision. However, if she could perfect her own techniques, then anything within her vision sphere would be incapable of touching her.

Perhaps the greatest benefits were that no physical disruption occurred, and that it could be activated and deactivated at the same speed as if she blinked. It made it impossible to tell when she was off guard.

With a yawn, she leapt off into the trees back towards Naruto's apartment… her home. Her heart stopped in mid-beat, and she nearly missed landing on the branch in front of her. That's right… she hadn't returned there since… since they had kissed. A feeling of panic welled up in her chest. He probably thought that she was scared off. She was, but not for the reasons he probably assumed. It wasn't like she was completely sure why as well. It had been wonderful, and she was so happy that it happened. Yet, a part of her

held reservations. Because a little voice clawed away at the back of her head, convincing her that Naruto didn't know what he was doing. Reminding her that Sakura was dead.

And that she was the second choice.

Naruto groaned as he woke up and his muscles reminded him once again that he was alive… and extremely sore. He glanced over at the large bonfire that kept him warm while simultaneously roasting the fish on the makeshift spits. He could barely make out Kakashi's form through the flames, although he could tell the man was reading his favorite series.

"So you finally woke up, you've been out for almost four hours," Kakashi said as Naruto sat up. "It's good to see you've cut down your recovery time by over half. You seem to also be getting a hang of all of your techniques."

Naruto rubbed the grogginess from his face.

"Not all of them."

"Really?" Kakashi shut his book and grabbed one of the fish. He tossed it to Naruto and took the other one for himself. "Are you talking about the variations of your Rasengan?"

"No." Naruto took a happy bite out of the fish. "I think most of my own attacks will work if I can control them."

"So you're talking about using the Kyubi's chakra? To what degree did you use it?"

"I only really used it for my fox cloak."

"Yamato told me about that. He said you actually had two kinds from what he saw."

Naruto nodded. A part of him felt uncomfortable talking about the cloak. The first was that it dealt with the fox, which made people uneasy and was now in Akatsuki hands. The other reason was that it was his and Jiraiya's secret. He'd kept quiet about it for so long it was difficult to talk about it, even if it was Kakashi. It probably didn't help that he hadn't gotten the opportunity to tell Sakura about it… he'd promised her that he would.

"How?" Kakashi's question jolted him from his thoughts. With a quick bite, he put his happy persona back on.

"One's just the Kyubi's chakra, that's the red one. The purple one is our chakra."

He almost laughed at Kakashi's expression. He didn't think it was possible for masked nin to be caught off guard. Speaking of masks, how was the guy going to eat his fish and not reveal his face?

"Our?"

"Ero-sensei and I came up with the idea. When I used just the Kyubi's chakra, I had less control over myself because the fox's energy replaced my own. Jiraiya found that my seal could split the chakra into the two base components."

Kakashi blinked in amazement.

"You divided the spiritual and physical energy of both yours and the Kyubi's chakras."

A wide grin stretched across Naruto's face.

"Yep! I took the fox's physical energy and mixed it with my spiritual, so I gained a power boost while keeping control of myself." He scratched the back of his head. "It wasn't as potent as the fox's real chakra, but the control was worth it."

"It must have been extremely powerful."

"Yes and no, four tails of mixed chakra was really only as powerful as two tails of Kyubi. It also didn't work well if the fox decided to fight me for it… which was most of the time. Trying to balance the mixture was tough enough as it was, but when Kyubi decided to mess with me, it was almost impossible."

Kakashi stared at his student for a while before he shook his head and somehow began to eat his fish without removing his mask. Naruto waited for a reply, but quickly grew bored and began to eat in earnest. Kakashi had finished before Naruto could take his second bite.

"You really are the most surprising ninja I have ever met, Naruto. Jiraiya-san must have been quite a teacher."

Naruto stared choking as he sputtered in indignation. He pounded himself in the chest several times before he leaned over the fire, only partially aware of how easy it would be for him to catch fire.

"Are you kidding me? Do you know what he did for my first training objective? He sealed my chakra, tied fresh steaks to my body, and abandoned me in a forest full of tigers for a week!"

"Mah, mah, he must have taught you a great deal though."

"He wouldn't teach me anything unless I figured it out on my own first. It took me two years to figure out that the Kage Bunshin recovered memories when it was dispelled. Although… although, it was because of his tough method that I am able to think things through a little better."

Kakashi just nodded and pulled his book back out.

"Finish up you food and then we'll start in again. I'm going to train you around the clock until you are back to one hundred percent. Since you know about the Kage Bunshin, we'll use that to help you with regaining your control."

"Okay!"

Naruto dug back into his meal voraciously as Kakashi continued to read in silence. The sounds of munching and hungry gulps echoed through the clearing. A part of Naruto was relishing the fact that he was getting the private training from his first teacher. It helped him feel more connected to Sasuke in a way. But, most of him was focused on the need to get better, and he couldn't think of anyone better than Kakashi. Ero-sensei was great, but he was more hands off and allowed things to progress at Naruto's own pace. Not that the Toad Sage's training wasn't tough, but Jiraiya never pushed him past his limits. He knew the silver haired jonin was much more willing to do so.

"So Naruto, how did the talk with Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-san go?"

Naruto blinked in surprise for a moment. He had honestly forgotten about it with everything that had happened since then. Sakura's death, his extraction, and then his recovery had put his mind constantly focused on what was ahead of him. It didn't really help that they had only fidgeted instead of saying anything useful. Although, Jiraiya had been in the process of saying something before they were interrupted. What was that again? Something about pare-… parents?

Naruto shot up to his feet.

"Son of a bit-!"

Shikamaru sighed for what must have been the hundredth time that week. He absently rubbed the black eye that had been courtesy of Ino. Apparently, telling her that she was working herself into looking like a hag was not the best approach. He always forgot that logic and Ino never got along when she was in one of her many moods. It wasn't his fault that he stated things bluntly. He wasn't trying to be

cruel at all, quite the opposite really. But when it came to dealing with Ino's rapidly changing emotions, his words did little.

He'd been completely honest with her and her behavior. While admirable, killing herself in some deranged attempt to honor Sakura was utterly stupid. She didn't like hearing that, but agreed with him on some level. However, he probably should of remained quiet when she had talked about how hard it was that Sakura and Sasuke were gone. Thinking back, saying they were a pair of selfish traitors probably was too much for her to deal with at the time. Of course, he knew that she knew it was the truth, even though he doubted she would ever admit it in any form. Yet, it didn't stop her from punching him.

Thank goodness for Choji. He was the gentle one of their group, and the one Ino would turn to. That was how it worked. He tore Ino down… and Choji built her back up.

Anger makes people do funny things. They can break down completely and be nearly, if not totally, catatonic. They can seem unaffected only to snap down the road. Or sometimes, a sense of total cold calm can wash over them. However, using a highly unstable Rasengan to open the door to a Hokage's office, which contained two of the most powerful ninja's in the village, could still be considered extreme and unexpected. This, of course, would be the exact manner by which Naruto Uzumaki chose to make his presence known.

The two Sannin had leapt to their feet instantly and were more than prepared to attack. Yet, Naruto stomped into the room without a moment's hesitation. A scowl plastered on his face. He glared at them as his eyes drifted back and forth between the two. His fingers twitched and he considered summoning another Rasengan just to make sure they fully understood how upset he was.

"Naruto, what are you-?" Jiraiya started to ask.

"What the hell do you two know about my parents?" Naruto barked. His blue eyes drifted down to a make shift operating table that the Yondaime's body rested on… in such a perfect state that it appeared as if he was just sleeping. "And why the hell are you messing with the Yondaime's corpse?"

"Easy Naruto, we'll talk about your parents later," Jiraiya said as he tried to placate his student. "You can't be here right now."

"No way." Naruto stomped up to him so that he was right in front of his teacher. "Your creepy research for another one of your trashy books can wait until after you tell me about my family!"

"Naruto Uzumaki stand down!" Tsunade voice seemed to shake the room with such authority even the books on the walls appeared to want to bow.

"Bite me you old hag!"

The vein on Tsunade's forehead grew, and she grabbed him by the front of his shirt. Her eye twitched in annoyance as a pain promising grin etched itself into her features.

"Brat, I'm going to kill you."

"Hime, we need to get him out of here now!" Jiraiya tried to push Naruto back, but she held firm.

"Not until I teach him a lesson."

"Try it you old bat!"

"We don't have time-."

Jiraiya froze as the seal on the Yondaime's stomach started to glow along with Naruto's. The light rapidly increased until the room was fully engulfed. Jiraiya sighed as Naruto felt himself being pulled into unconsciousness.

"Crap."

Hinata nervously opened the door to Naruto's apartment. She couldn't sense him anywhere. A thought popped into her head. That's right, Naruto was training with Kakashi. She should have realized that he wouldn't be here. Her fingers came together and almost started to fidget. After thinking about it, she really wanted to talk to him. To let him know what she was thinking. He needed to know about her insecurities, so that if the kiss wasn't an accident, they would be able to move forward honestly.

Kakashi cursed under his breath as he saw the glow coming from the Hokage's office window diminish. Of course, Naruto was able to make over a thousand clones when he was angry and off on a rampage. And of course, they managed to stall him long enough that he couldn't catch up with the blonde before he had a chance to calm him down. He was under the impression that Jiraiya had already revealed Naruto's lineage, and Kakashi had wanted to tell the blonde more about his father. Why were things never easy when it came to the ex-Jinchuriki?

He jumped straight for the window and landed on the edge. His lone eye widened as it saw four still bodies strewn about the room. This wasn't good. He quickly hopped down and made and impromptu door with the Hokage's desk. Other people did not need to see this. Yondaime's body aside, it was a dangerous situation having three ninja unconscious in the village leader's office… especially when one of them was the leader herself.

He summoned several clones to guard the windows and find Shizune. It was going to be a long night.

Naruto frowned as he sat up in his mindscape. He didn't miss coming to this place at all. Why was he here anyway? With the Kyubi gone, this place was basically empty… a reminder of what it used to

contain. His head snapped around as he heard a groan behind him. Jiraiya and Tsunade were slowly climbing to their feet. Perfect, he wasn't sure if he was glad or angry to see them.

"Where are we Jiraiya?" Tsunade asked in a disoriented tone.

"My mind… or more accurately the seal," Naruto said as he stared walking down the all too familiar pathways.

"How?"

"It was what I was trying to get across amongst your two's squabbling," Jiraiya said as his nose wrinkled up at the stale water soaking his pants. "With Minato's chakra having been used for both seals, and the Kyubi's chakra being divided amongst them, I was concerned there would be a reaction."

"Who's Minato?'

"The Yondaime, Naruto."

"Oh… why are you messing with his body anyway?"

"To help you brat," Tsunade said as she walked up to him and swatted him on the back of the head harshly. "He's trying to see if we can get to the other half of the Kyubi's chakra to deal with the seal's constant draining on your system. This is why you shouldn't barge in when you're not invited."

Naruto scowled as he rubbed the back of his head.

"Well sorry for wanting to know about my parents! How do you two know about them anyway? And another thing, why didn't you tell me while I was stuck in a hospital bed?"

"Because healing was our main priority," Jiraiya said as he stomped up. "Be grateful brat!"

Naruto crossed his arms and pouted as he looked to the side.

"Yeah, you're doing a great job."

"Why you little-."

Naruto didn't flinch as his mentor's fingers twitched and move towards his throat. With a sigh, he leveled a serious glare on both of the Sannin. As pissed as he was, he couldn't be acting like an angry child. They were possibly in real trouble, as was anything involving the seal on his gut, but more importantly he wanted to know the truth. Obviously, they didn't think he could handle it until he was older. That implied that a certain degree of maturity was needed for him to learn.

"What do you know about my parents?"

His tone was calm but forceful. It didn't leave any room for argument, but encouraged discussion. Jiraiya had stopped in mid-step as if caught off guard by the sudden change in attitude. He scratched the top of his head and cast a quick glance at Tsunade.

"Your mother was named Kushina Uzumaki. She was a ninja from the destroyed Uzu no Kuni. Your father was Minato Namikaze… the Yondaime."

Naruto tilted his head to the side as his brow scrunched up in concentration for a moment. His father was the Yondaime? His eyes grew wide slightly as a light finally kicked on in his mind. His father was the Yondaime. They narrowed as he stared down at the ground. So… his father… sealed the Kyubi into him. He didn't know what to think of that. On one hand, he understood why, but on the other it did little to comfort him from all the years of loneliness. Up until this moment, the Yondaime was someone he revered. A man who had put everything before himself and was loved without equal.

Now, he wasn't so sure. Sealing the Kyubi in him didn't matter. Yeah it sucked, but that was his responsibility. No, what mattered was the fact that his father had died to do it. He had been left alone and hated by the one person who was always supposed to protect him.

Had the Yondaime been the only one who knew of the Shiki Fujin Naruto could forgive him. However, that was not the case.

"Go ahead and let it out Naruto. You're allowed to be upset.

Naruto looked back up at the two as his fists clenched. It was no wonder they were so uncomfortable telling him about this. But, he wouldn't blame them. They hadn't abandoned him.

"I'm not upset that he chose me to be the Kyubi's container. But… why did he have to be the one to seal me? You told me all about the seals used to deal with the Kyubi, Sensei. Why did my father use it when I know the old man knew it as well?"

"Minato would never ask someone to do what he did."

"Personal feelings aside, he was stronger and younger than the Sandaime. I loved the old man to death, but it would have made more sense for him to do it."

"Naruto, you can't mean that," Tsunade said with a sad frown. "Wishing for someone else to be dead instead… that's not like you."

"It's not like that!" Naruto said with a hint of panic in his voice. "I don't want anyone to die. I loved the old man like a grandfather. I just… I just question the Yondaime's reasons. Everything points to the fact that he should not have been the one to seal me, since there was another option."

Tsunade and Jiraiya nodded their head reluctantly in agreement. Naruto relaxed the death grip he had made with his hand. The sorrow he felt in his chest was like an indescribable tightness. It was a weight on his body that left him feeling so extremely tired.

"The more I think about it… the more I think he just didn't want to deal with the repercussions of having his son as the village's Jinchuriki. A heroic death was certainly more welcome than becoming the parent of the village's shame."

"Naru-."

"How did my mother die?"

He didn't want to talk about that man anymore. There wasn't anymore to be said that wouldn't sound like excuses. Besides, his mother could be his saving grace. He would be content if there was at least one parent that cared about him. However, that feeling dissipated as the two Sannin shared a pained glance at each other. He felt his stomach twist into a series painful knots. It was like he instinctually knew that he wouldn't like the answer.

"Kushina… Kushina isn't really dead," Jiraiya said slowly. "We needed a new outpost built incase Konoha ever fell to enemy attack. It would be a safe house for the civilians and a temporary military base until we could take back the village. The Daimyo, Sandaime, and council of fire decided that it should be built in Uzu no Kuni. Not only did we have the sole claims to the land, but the area had been so ravaged by war that it was nothing but miles of wasteland, deadly dust storms, and completely isolated from the rest of the world."

"So she was selected to lead the mission because she knew the country." Naruto could understand the reasoning behind it. She would have some idea of the geography no matter how much it changed, and she could point out any valuable information or resources. However, that left several painful questions. For a moment, he didn't want to ask. But, he knew his own curiosity would drive him insane. "Why hasn't she come back yet… better yet, why wasn't I taken with her?"

"The outpost compound was completed only last year, and we are still trying to fully staff it," Tsunade said. "And the terrain was no place for an infant or even an older child. Naruto, the terrain is so dangerous I wouldn't even send an experienced genin team there alone. Also… with you holding the Kyubi…"

"I was too big of a risk to take out of Konoha's protection." Naruto cut her off. A bitter chuckle almost found its way to his lips. It always

came down to the thing sealed in him. He tried desperately to not feel like he had been intentionally screwed over. All of the reasons up to this point had been logically correct, even if they sucked for him. The constricting weight around his lungs grew worse as his mind became aware of something hidden in their speech. "You talked about her like she was already dead. I wasn't supposed to know about her was I?"

Tsunade did her best to look serious. The same look she gave to ninja going on a particularly dangerous mission. However, the pure apologetic glimmer hidden in her eyes made it fail terribly.

"No. The mission had been non-negotiable as far as the council was concerned, and the estimated length was thirty years. If at the end of that time, the mission is complete, Kushina will have the option to either continue to lead the outpost or return home. She felt that by that time you would have outgrown the need of a mother, and her sudden return would have caused more trouble for you. She felt it would have been better to leave you with the belief that she had died."

"So why tell me?"

"Because you deserve to know that is your right as a child and as a Konoha-nin." Tsunade gave a forced, if not slightly hopeful smile. "After Akatsuki has been dealt with, if you wish to go join her in the outpost for some time I will allow it. You should have that option."

Naruto clenched his fists and turned around as his eyes hardened.

"Don't bother. They decided to do the honorable things for Konoha's benefit. I can't fault them for not seeing me as a priority."

"Naruto that's not-."

"I don't want to hear your excuses for them Jiraiya!" Naruto fought to control his emotions. He had little doubt if Kyubi was still sealed within him multiple tails would have sprouted. "There were plenty of

options available to them that could have both benefited the village and me! They chose the easy path, which meant abandoning me. I won't presume to know why they chose to do so, although I would guess it was because of the fox. They were awesome ninja. I can respect them for that… but as parents… well they can't even be called that."

He started walking down the corridor as the Sannin started after him.

"I am sorry Naruto," Jiraiya said. "I wish things had turned out differently."

Naruto clamped down on his emotions. They were in possible danger so he needed to be focused on that. Then, he needed to get back to training. There would be time to think later.

"It's fine. You guys did what you had to." Naruto turned over his shoulder and forced a grin. "Hey Baa-chan, can I at least punch those old fools on the council when we get out of this?"

Tsunade gave a sad smile.

"Sure brat."

"Then let's get out of here."

"Danzo-sama, we have collected enough material from Jugo to mass produce the new seal you have crafted," one of the various Root agents said with a bow.

Danzo stood slowly from the stone throne he had had crafted by his subjects. It was only fitting that the leader had a place to rest that designated his position after all. He slowly made his was through the dim stone corridors. His cane made a soft tap every time he moved forward. The agent that had addressed him led the way and opened the heavy metal door to the lab. He gave a bow as the bandaged man passed him and walked up to the chained orange haired man.

Jugo was strewn out upon the table and looked on the verge of death. The life had been literally sucked out of him, and the only keeping him imprisoned in his corpse was the seals branded onto his sickly pale skin. Danzo walked up by the man's head and stared down at the pair of dry bloodshot eyes. The eyes pleaded with him for mercy, but Danzo merely motioned for his agents to hand him a brush and some ink.

"You have served Konoha well. Your blood will help usher in an undefeatable army and secure my village's safety forever."

Jugo's cracked lips moved slowly as if he was trying to form words. However, the mouth was so dry words were merely an impossible hope.

"I have one last use for you." Danzo began painting a new seal on the man's head. "I must make sure that the fools that rule my beloved Konoha are kept unaware. You will distract them for me."

Jugo's eyes widened and he renewed his weak struggle.

"I know from Orochimaru's research that you attempt to suppress your foul blood. Even though you lose out in the end and evolve to the second level of the cursed seal, I assume that a small part of you holds back the vilest of your power. As the original, it is not so strange to believe that the removal of your humanity would release another level of power."

Danzo finished the last line of the seal and handed the ink back to the agent.

"Fu."

"Yes Sir."

"Take this creature to the outskirts of Konoha. Once you arrive, dispel the restriction seals and activate the rage inducing one."

"As you wish."

"N- n- no," Jugo whimpered quietly.

His plea went ignored.

Naruto blinked as he looked at the swirling, shapeless mass of blue chakra that was being gathered where the Kyubi used to glare at him. It was odd seeing the wide open gates and empty cell, if not a little unnerving. He could easily see how this was causing a problem. The pipes that once glowed red were now blue and pumping chakra back into the cage. There was no doubt that once it was filled back to completion, he wouldn't have the drain anymore, but if he did pull on it, then he'd have the same problems all over again.

"I had no idea that the inner seal was so intricate," Jiraiya said as he looked around in reserved awe. He grinned. "Well at least we know it's not a completely empty space in your head!"

"Shut it Ero-sensei!"

He allowed himself to be baited. It was better to keep his mind on the task at hand. It was better to pretend nothing had changed.

Naruto caught something in the corner of his eye behind the mass of chakra. Cautiously, he started to walk into the cage as sense of apprehension welled up in his gut. He'd never seen the back of the cage. Even with Kyubi gone, it still felt like the fox was going to jump out and devour him at any time. He edged around the chakra mass and walked up to a door. Had it always been there? Somehow, he doubted it.

"Hey Ero-sensei, Baa-chan check this out!"

"It's Hokage-sama you brat."

The two Sannin walked up behind him and stared at the door.

"I take it this is new Naruto?" Jiraiya asked.

"I think so. What do you think it is?"

"A door gaki."

Naruto's eye twitched and he whirled around at his mentor.

"I know that you lecher! Why is it here?"

"It could be any number of things. My guess would be it is a connection to Minato's seal… the other part of the Kyubi's chakra."

Naruto's eyes went wide in realization and he turned back around.

"Oh okay… let's do this!"

He reached out and grasped the handle as a tingling feeling made its way up his arm. Every instinct in his body was warning him to back away.

"Naruto wait-."

Instinct was overrated.

Naruto pulled the door open hard and an explosion of chakra pulled them through at a furious pace. It seemed for a moment like they were flying, but almost immediately their feet found ground. They stumbled forward as the door slammed behind them, accompanied by an echoing click.

His eyes roamed around in awe at the seemingly endless battlefield stretched out around them. The ground was grey and charred with jagged cliffs and valleys in the distance. The sky was black and almost made the place seem like a gigantic room. Dozens, if not hundreds, of withered and battered ghosts either sat around small ragged bonfires or fought against each other. Their exhaustion was apparent, yet they weakly struck at each other as they struggled to

stand. The atmosphere was so oppressive it made it difficult to breathe as the air was filled with hopelessness and bloodlust.

"Brat, what have you done?" Tsunade asked as she stared ahead of her. Her eyes darted over to Jiraiya quickly. "I thought you had eliminated his reckless charging habit?"

"Nine times out of ten, I have."

"Sorry," Naruto said sheepishly. "I'm just anxious to get home."

"With Hinata," Tsunade said slyly.

"Nice gaki."

"Shut up Ero-sensei."

"Why are you here?" An otherworldly voice boomed above them. It was a strange voice, like a hiss mixed with a growl. The words seemed too reverberate against themselves, and it gave Naruto chills listening to it.

The three ninja looked up and the eldest two paled while Naruto's brow furrowed in confusion. A giant white robed being stared down at them with empty eye sockets. Its purple skin shimmered from the explosions far off in the battlefield. Naruto frowned. What the hell was that thing, an ogre?

"Why are you here?" The creature asked again.

"What are you?" Naruto asked.

"Your world calls me the Shinigami. However, other worlds refer to me as other things. Why are you in my stomach?"

"Eh… I have no idea."

Jiraiya and Tsunade discreetly moved away from him as the death god lowered itself closer to him

"It does not matter. Another soul in my belly is nothing to complain about." The creature sighed happily. "I do so enjoy this world's inhabitants. Your high Reiryoku grants me a great deal of nourishment. Unlike all the others, I only need to feed every ten odd years or so."

"What the hell are you rambling about?"

"Oh nothing, just feeling blessed that your world is full of people equivalent to the weaker of those cursed beings. Yet, you are unaware of what I am."

"Ne Ero-sensei, you know what this guy's talking about?" Naruto looked over his shoulder to find that he was alone. So they had left? It was probably for the best. If they split up they could get what they needed from here and get out. The sooner the better was an understatement.

"It appears they left you child. Do not fret… they cannot escape."

Naruto frowned and stared up at the thing. How do they get out of here anyway? He didn't doubt that the other two had some idea how to. It would have been nice to tell him, but whatever. He might as well figure out as much as possible on his own. A perfect example as what was this thing doing connected to his seal.

"So ogre, how do I get out of here?"

"Leave? No your soul will provide me with years of sustenance." The creature peered down even closer, if possible. "Yes… your energy is almost on par with a lieutenant… quite remarkable."

"Look, I really don't care what the hell you're talking about." Naruto slid into a fighting stance and said a silent prayer that his control was good enough to manage. "You're going to tell me how to get out of here, or I'm going to beat it out of you."

The creature laughed voraciously and landed on the ground. A gnarled purple hand with jagged tips extended from beneath the robe.

"Perhaps, I will snack on your soul for a while."

"Should we really have left Naruto there alone?" Tsunade asked as she sprinted along next to Jiraiya. They weaved through the war torn landscape. The battling spirits gave them no mind. "He only had one week of training with Kakashi."

"He'll manage. We need to find Minato and the Kyubi fast."

"Agreed… you've felt it to haven't you? The pull on our chakra. It's miniscule, but we are definitely being drained."

"Yeah, so the longer we're here, the worse it will be."

"Do you have any idea how to find them? This place appears limitless."

"Come on hime, how hard can it be to find a giant malevolent fox?"

They leapt off a cliff and fell towards a lower level.r

"Please don't tell me Naruto's care free attitude has rubbed off on you."

"Maybe a little." Jiraiya smiled slightly when she frowned at him. "Honestly though, if it is Konoha's Yellow Flash versus the Kyubi, this place isn't big enough to hide them from us."

Author's Notes:

Here it is. Hope everyone had a pleasant holiday. Let me know what you think.

Just to touch on a subject quick.

There were several points raised about Hinata and her ability to cook. I don't believe that was actually touched upon in the manga, rather it was in the anime filler arks (which I never watched). Actually for future reference, I stopped watching the anime all together after ten Shippuden episodes consisting entirely of Naruto growling and Kakashi staring at Deidara's butt. If there was an actual case referencing her ability to cook in the manga, then I will admit my mistake, but chalk it up to creative changes. Just attribute it to her non-stop training for three years with no room for anything else.

See you next Saturday

Lightning

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 14:

Jugo didn't even have the strength to grunt when they dropped him harshly on the grassy ground. He could barely make out the top of Konoha's defensive walls through the tree line. However, he knew that once the other him came out it wouldn't matter. The village was still close enough the other him would notice it through its malevolence. And this time, there would be no chance of reverting back. He would be sealed within his mind totally and the worst part of him would be released. He doubted there was a ninja in that village that could stop him if he went beyond level two.

Oh he knew about it. It was the one part that he never allowed the other him access to. It was a monstrous power that made even his normal outbreaks seem docile. He could sense it through sheer instinct. The power to destroy all things. A demon that would be completely devoid of any semblance of humanity.

He could feel the seals burn off his body one by one. If they had not sucked every last fluid from his body, he most likely would have been crying. This was the closest to death he would ever come. Once the beast emerged, he would no longer exist. The thought was painful. Death meant no more. This meant an eternity of total paralysis. His tired aching eyes roamed about through the forest and memorized every detail. The small animals and lush colors. They were burned into his memory so that he could be allowed some small amount of peace on his journey to his mental imprisonment. While locked in darkness for eternity, he would be able to focus on those that would

have been potential friends. He'd ignore the fact that in a matter of minutes everything he saw would be eviscerated.

The last seal lifted and he felt his chakra infuse his blood and it start to burn under the skin. The seal on his head tingled as he saw the Root run away. His skin started to darken and he closed his eyes as a new personality emerged from the back of his mind and pushed him away. The skin turned a shade shy of black as the body grew bigger and more muscular. Clothes ripped and sharp bone protrusions dotted the body. A crown of razor like bone emerged from his scalp.

The beast stood slowly. Deep powerful breaths caused the leaves nearby to sway. The creature stretched its clawed hands and toes as its orange eyes looked about hungrily. This was a cursed seal beyond level two, when the demonic blood met no barrier.

Bloodlust had become personified.

Naruto had done a lot of stupid things in his life. He knew it even if he would never admit it. Drinking rotten milk, getting tied to a log for stealing food, kissing Hinata on instinct, the list could go on and on. However, he was positive challenging the god of death to a fight… and boasting he would win, was a new level that even surprised him. It wouldn't stop him from doing it though.

He jumped straight at the purple skinned being and formed an unstable Rasengan in his hand. One thing he had learned with his numerous matches with Kakashi had been to let his instincts guide him a bit more. His body knew what it had to do, and he had to let it. He thrust the Rasengan forward and the Shinigami caught it effortlessly with its palm. The unstable ball exploded and Naruto barely had time to correct himself so that he landed on his feet.

The creature screeched and swept down toward him. He brought his fingers up in a cross and summoned as many Kage Bunshin as he

could. A measly three hundred came into existence. Each one formed a shaky Rasengan and leapt toward the flying death god.

"Uzumaki Naruto Nisen Rendan Rasengan Special!"

The Shinigami batted away as many of the flying orange projectiles as it could, but many slammed into it. The clones were reduced to smoke as they crashed into it and Naruto ran. He leapt through the various battles taking place as the entire battlefield seemed to shake from the creature's angry roar. A grin tugged at his lips even as sweat started to form on his forehead. For some reason, he wasn't getting as tired as he had earlier. Maybe the training was just that good… or it was this place and something in it.

He glanced behind him to see the death god racing after him. A sense of panic caught itself in his throat. The being was virtually unharmed aside from a few scorch marks. How was that possible? His combo was one of the strongest moves he had. He could try wind element manipulation, but honestly he'd probably just kill himself with it. His eyes widened as everything started to be bathed in a red glow. His eyes glanced over his shoulder and a nervous sweat started up on the back of his neck.

The Shinigami had a large red orb spinning in its mouth that seemed to be increasing in power.

"Oh shi-."

A blazing red beam shot out straight for him. He tried to mold his chakra into a shell around him in order to escape, but his body wouldn't cooperate with him. The rampaging emotions from the past hour coupled with his sudden fear destroyed his focus. His eyes widened as he prepared to take the hit. This was going to hurt. The blast connected with the ground and a massive explosion rocked the field as it sent spirits flying in different directions and the beam vaporized whatever came into contact with it.

Naruto blinked as he looked down at the ground, over to where the beam had destroyed everything, and back to the ground. Had his Shunshin worked at the last second or was he now completely dead? His eyes paused when they rested on a pair of black boots.

"Battling the Shinigami is rather unwise newcomer," the voice above him said.

Naruto's eyes widened as he recognized the voice. It was powerful, but had a warm tone to it. He slowly looked up and a large smile spread across his face. The man looked sternly at the death god while Naruto's excitement built up.

"Jiji!" Naruto hopped up and grabbed the shorter old man's shoulders. "Oh man, I've missed you so much!"

"I'm sorry son but I don-." Hiruzen Sarutobi squinted as he looked up at the beaming smile Naruto had pasted onto his face. The old man's eyes widened. "Naruto?"

"You bet old man."

"You've grown child." The Sandaime looked him up and down. "Although, I see you still insist on wearing orange. How have you not been killed yet?"

Naruto crossed his arms.

"Because I'm awesome that's why."

Hiruzen chuckled and turned his attention back to the monster that was making its way towards them. It seemed to be out of breath, and was moving significantly slower than before.

"Why are you here Naruto? You didn't… you didn't use Shiki Fujin did you?"

"What? No." Naruto shook his head. "Ero-sensei could explain it better, but somehow we got dragged here because of my seal.

There's really too much to explain with this moron coming this way."

"Then follow me," Sarutobi said as he leapt off a nearby cliff. "We should hide for now."

"But-."

"Now Naruto."

Naruto cast one last look over at the Shinigami before he took after the old man.

Jiraiya felt the skin on the sides of his mouth tug painfully from the smile he had on his face. There standing on the top of the valley in all his proud glory was his prized student. The one man he had considered a son. The Yondaime, Minato Namikaze, feared ninja of Konohagakure. He leapt up with Tsunade close behind. However, his eyes kept darting around. The other half of the Kyubi would not be far.

Minato's head snapped over in their direction. The steel blue eyes were serious and ready to battle. However, they softened immediately as they recognized who approached. Minato blinked and leapt down from his spot.

"Sensei, what are you doing here?" Minato asked with concern. "How are you here?"

"We don't have a lot of time to explain. Where is the Kyubi's other half?"

Minato's eyes became scrutinizing, and Jiraiya noticed him absently reaching for the kunai jutting out from his coat.

"A group of missing-nin took the other half. We need the other half to rejuvenate Naruto."

The feared Yondaime paled, and a look of horrified concern washed over his face.

"Naruto, is he okay?"

"Somehow, I believe it is in no small part to your seal. But, we need the fox's other half to stabilize his chakra."

Minato nodded and turned.

"I'll find it." He went to take a step, but paused. "Naruto, what is he like?"

"He's definitely yours and Kushina's kid. You would be damn proud of him."

Minato took off as Tsunade walked up close behind Jiraiya.

"It is probably wise that we don't let him know Naruto is here."

"Agreed."

Sarutobi looked down sadly at the flames of the pathetic bonfire he had built. Naruto almost felt bad divulging the entire story since the old man's passing, but he had asked. It wouldn't have felt right to lie to him. He would have left out his own personal drama, but Jiji had almost been more inquisitive about that than world events. It was just like him Naruto supposed. Sarutobi was always more interested in the people of Konoha than the village itself. Probably why he was elected over that bastard Danzo.

"It is a shame what happened to your team Naruto." Hiruzen looked up with a proud grin. "But you have handled it well as both a shinobi and a person. I am proud of you my boy. You'll make a fine Hokage someday."

Naruto blinked in surprise and felt his eyes water slightly. Damn it, this wasn't the time to break down like that. He wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. But, he wasn't told that he had made someone proud often. It was a little overwhelming with everything else going on.

"Thanks Jiji."

"I must say your generation has become something remarkable. You've all grown so much. It makes me a little sad to have missed it." The old Hokage stood up and stretched with various pops. "However, seeing you and listening to your stories, I have absolute faith that you will rid Konoha of its enemies and make the will of fire rage like never before."

Naruto stood as well. A bright grin formed on his face and he scratched the back of his head.

"I won't let you down! And none of the others will either."

"I'm sure you won't. Now, we need to get you out of here."

"I do not think so," the Shinigami's voice echoed through the battlefield. The creature appeared above them and swung. Its purple claw like fingers missed them by mere inches.

Naruto's lip curled up in annoyance and he stretched his palm out.

"Jiji stand back. I don't know how well I can control this."

"They are still alive and show no signs of distress. However, nothing I do will wake them," Shizune said as she cancelled her diagnostic technique and looked up. "I really have no knowledge of seals outside of medical applications."

Kakashi sighed and looked out the window. This was the last thing he needed right now given everything going on. Aside from the multitude of questions he had, there was the matter of not knowing

how long they would be out. Once morning came, there would be people who would want answers. It wasn't like they could hide this from everyone either.

A massive roar from just beyond the village's front wall ripped through the night. It caused Kakashi's breath to catch in his throat. The only thing that had made something like that was the Kyubi. Was Akatsuki attacking already? He twisted around and almost went to leap out the window, but paused. They needed a commander if this was an attack, and that unfortunately meant that he needed to stay where he was. Damn Tsunade for making him the emergency leader.

"What is that?" Shizune asked. A visible tremor shook through her body.

"I don't know." He turned back toward her. "Summon Anbu. I want Sai here guarding the office and Hokage. Have Yamato act as go between. The rest of them will lead the jonin to intercept any threat. I want chunin prepared to either assist with the fighting or evacuate genin and civilians."

"I'm on it."

Naruto closed his eyes and focused on building a more stable Rasengan. He let the familiar feeling flow freely instead of trying to control it. His body wouldn't fail him. Hiruzen's eyes widened in awe as the blue orb came into view. It shone brightly in the dreary world like a beacon of hope. Naruto kept focusing and let his wind element drift towards the orb. This was the only chance they had, an unstable and incomplete technique that could just as easily fail and kill them. Yet, the familiar whistle of the element powered sphere caused him to grin. The air whipped around it and his eyes snapped forward. The creature charged and he leapt straight for it.

"Futon: Rasengan!"

Naruto slammed his attack into the creature's blocking hand as hard as he could. A feral grin crept up as the hand shook and started to snap apart. The Shinigami roared and flew back as Naruto landed heavily. He hid his burning and bleeding hand as Hiruzen appeared next to him. It had barely held together. If they made it out of this, he would make this technique his main objective once his body was good again. At least he didn't need to dive and scream for everyone to find cover this time.

"Naruto how did you learn that attack?"

"I made it." Naruto stood up shakily. His hand cradled safely against his body. "Ero-sensei taught me the Rasengan, and then recently I've been playing with adding element chakra to it. I still have a long way to go."

"It is still impressive none the less. However, I don't believe that it will be enough to take out the god of death."

Naruto watched as the purple hand burst apart and started to reform itself… perfectly fine. He ignored the feeling of dread welling up in his gut. His lips turned up into a snarl. What did it take to knock this guy down? That was without a doubt his most powerful move, and unless he could miraculously complete it in the next three seconds it wouldn't gain any more strength.

"Foolish little being of flesh. My kind can not fall to physical energy. Only Reiryoku can harm me, and you as a living being cannot hope to summon enough to destroy me."

"Damn it," Naruto growled out.

He didn't know what that Reiryoku was, but he guessed it was part of his chakra since his attack had damaged it. If physical energy didn't touch it, then it must be the spiritual component of his chakra. The question was how he could get enough to kill this thing in one go. It wasn't like he had enough spirit energy to do it separately. His mind raced through his options. The thing had been weakened when it

tossed that red beam. Maybe if he could get it to do it several more times he could finish it off.

"Jiji, hit this guy with everything you got after he fires his attack again."

"Naruto what are you planning?"

Naruto ignored him and shot forward. He pulled out a kunai and channeled his wind element into it. The edge was shaped as finely as possible. The thing struck out with its massive hand, but Naruto lunged to the side and leapt for its face. He swung hard, and the wind blade scrapped across its eyes. The creature shrieked in agony, and Naruto was flung back.

"Damn you little flesh bug! I will not let you end me like some blasted Shinigami!"

Naruto fought back a grin as he flipped to his feet as the immediate area was bathed in a red glow. The creature fired and he dove to the side. The beam ripped up the ground, but he ignored it and charge in for another attack. A massive dragon of fire slammed into the death god's side, and the being turned towards Sarutobi. It prepared another blast, and Naruto jumped onto its head.

The blonde pushed as much wind chakra into the kunai has he could and stabbed it into the red ball of energy. The orb churned angrily… and exploded. Naruto winced as he was blown back and the burning energy licked at his body. His feet absently impacted the ground and he had to fight the urge to pass out. The red engulfed the creature and it gave a final pained shriek as it was broken down into thousands of pieces… then nothing.

Naruto tried to stand, but found he couldn't. He was spent, no question about it. However, he had to remain awake. There was a real possibility that the death god was not the only threat around here. The ground shook and the black sky opened up. Sarutobi appeared next to him and hoisted him up. The oppressive

atmosphere was vanishing rapidly and the fighting on the battlefield stopped.

"What's going on?" Naruto asked.

"You defeated the keeper of this place Naruto. It appears as if the spirits are able to finally pass on. How you did so is nothing short of a miracle."

They turned as a tri-pronged kunai landed behind them and three people appeared around it in a golden flash. Naruto didn't know whether to be happy or annoyed. Jiraiya and Tsunade obviously achieved their goal, but that man was with them. The last person he wanted to deal with. He pushed himself off of Sarutobi and staggered over to his teacher.

Naruto grit his teeth and grabbed the Sannin by the front of his jacket.

"You damn pervert! Why did you go and leave me like that?"

Jiraiya instinctively pinched his student's cheeks and stretched his face.

"I'm not going to hold your hand brat!"

"Don't use that excuse just because you want to go see if there are any ghost women."

"I don't need an excuse to do that."

"I swear to God. I will burn all of your notes!"

A familiar roar shook the field and Naruto's eyes widened. He recognized that roar. It was as malevolent as it was welcoming. A nervous grin appeared on his face as the ground shook. Something big was running towards them… something he was surprised to find he missed.

When the Kyubi had been taken, his initial reaction was panic. Yet, when it ended, he was surprised the joy of no longer being a Jinchuriki was hollow. As much as he didn't want to admit it, a part of him, of who he was, had been lost with that creature. Sure, it was nice not having the risks associated with it, but there was a sense of familiarity that was gone. The fox had a loathing respect for him at best, and desired nothing more than to devour him. However, it was a part of him and he found himself missing it slightly. Would he have gotten over it? There was no doubt in his mind that once he truly wrapped his head around it the relief of no longer containing the fox would render him ecstatic. However, for now the village needed him at full strength… and he needed the fox for that.

A giant yellowish orange fox with nine tails barreled into view. It was ethereal like as it moved with an eased grace, as a burning spirit would be. The others glanced at him nervously, although the Yondaime seemed to be calculating a plan. Apparently, no one had figured out how to reunite the fox's chakra and him. He started to walk towards the fox as the other four moved closer together.

"We need to get out of here and regroup," Minato said as he prepared another of those strange kunai. "Hey kid, come here."

Naruto ignored him and moved farther away from the group until he was directly in the path of the gigantic fox. He was insane, there was no doubt about it. Hinata would be so pissed at him for taking this big of a risk that is if she would ever talk to him again. He sucked in as much air as he could and ignored the blonde man running towards him. His help was unwanted, and unneeded. If he was going to become a Jinchuriki again, then he had to tame the beast now.

"Sit down and shut up you stupid fox!"

Naruto's voice echoed across the entirety of the death god's brightening stomach. It rang with confidence and everyone around took notice. The beast slid to an abrupt stop right before him. The fox spirit seemed surprised by the lack of fear, by the sheer audacity

Naruto had for talking to it. Its burning eyes peered down at the smaller inquisitively.

"Who are you to tell me to stop boy?"

Naruto formed a feral grin and jabbed his thumb into his chest. He felt his strength returning to him just by being in the chakra masses presence.

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki, and your other half's jailer. Now give me all of your chakra!"

Hiruzen nudged Jiraiya in the ribs as everyone stared at Naruto incredulously.

"Jiraiya… I believe Naruto is your student yes?" The toad sage nodded absently. "I believe you need to teach him about not picking fights with giant beings of unbelievable power."

"He got Gamabunta to agree to work with him in one day… he was twelve."

"Ah yes, very well then."

The fox's eyes narrowed and its massive head leaned down lower.

"I sense my true half's residual energy within you. So you're the little whelp that became my Jinchuriki."

Naruto ignored the gasp that came from the man behind him. He didn't dare turn to look. It was partially because he didn't trust this other Kyubi, and mostly because he didn't want anything to do with the Yondaime.

"Damn right I am. Now the other you is gone and my control is all messed up. I need you to help balance me out."

"Why should I trade one cage for another? Here, I am sentient and have free will. In your seal, I will merely be a mass of barely self-

aware chakra, another type of element for you to manipulate freely. I know my chakra will take on the role that my other half did, but I will lose myself. So why should I not destroy you now?"

"Because, here you'll just eventually be consumed into nothing. Although if this place is destroyed, you won't have anywhere to move on to, because you are incomplete. If that's what you want fine, but with me, you still have a chance to escape when we encounter your other half."

Naruto kept his confident grin up as the burning creature's eyes widened. He knew it was a gamble encouraging escape, but he needed that level of control back. It wasn't the power he needed. It was the fact that he would scrap three years of training every time he fought an opponent and had to draw from the seal. He'd never improve if he always started at ground zero.

"Do you really crave power so much human? I know that your kind do not accept the containers well. You risk losing any bonds you may have gained. Yet, you choose to give up your freedom for my strength. Why?"

"Because my people need me. Besides, I don't want your power. I just want mine."

He fought the urge to tense as the creature snorted. The fox's head came close enough that Naruto could easily reach out and touch it.

"Very well boy… I will agree to work with you… for now."

Naruto grinned and placed his hands on the beast's nose. His seal started to glow and the burning fox was quickly pulled into it. It was both painful and not, both burning and cold. It went as quickly as it came, and he could almost hear the gates screeching closed before a click echoed in his mind. Immediately, he could feel the effects as chakra surged into every part of his body. The weakness was evaporating with each passing second. His excitement rose. He was normal again.

Hinata flipped backwards as the beast's clawed hand swiped at her head. It roared angrily as a burst of vile chakra accompanying the sound. She was blown back mid-flip. With an elegant twist, her feet found the ground. What was this thing? Her head snapped up as it charged her with a degree of speed that such a hulking monstrosity shouldn't possess.

Lee and Gai appeared before her and both lunched powerful kicks into the things chest. It stalled with a grunt and a massive swarm of bugs engulfed it. Shino and his father stood stoically behind the creature as the bugs buzzed around it excitedly. She charged chakra into her hands and gathered her second wind. The thing had caught everyone off guard. Anbu had been spread out around the village walls for fear that there were more invaders, and the unfortunate squad of jonin that had confronted the thing had been torn apart.

It had bashed through the village wall, a wall that took a giant summon to even damage. She had been the closest available ninja when the thing had taken out the jonin squad. Her job had been to hold out until Anbu or some other reinforcements could arrive. The other four showed up the moment she started confronting it. Shibi had ordered them to push the thing out of the village.

So they had begun to work together. She would stun it with chakra blasts, while Lee and Gai tried to knock it back. Shino and his father would then try to weaken it with their bugs. This was the fourth time the cycle had been completed. The monster wasn't showing any signs of wear, and the Aburame bugs were becoming weak from the massive amounts of cursed chakra. At this rate, they would need to start taking more desperate actions… something Shibi had expressively forbade.

"Now Hinata," Gai said as the bugs were pulled back.

She focused her chakra into her feet and blasted forward as she shaped the chakra in her hands into a thin beam. Her hands lashed forward at dizzying speeds. The beams were like singing whips as

they struck the creature relentlessly. Smooth cuts appeared on its body as the attack ate away at it. The thing bellowed and punched the air with its massive fist. The air seemed to make a large booming sound. A massive bullet of chakra condensed wind raced forward and caught Hinata's beam net with enough force to send her flying back.

She grit her teeth as she tumbled along the ground. Had her attack not been going, that blast would have crushed her. Her eyes landed on the creature as its wounds started to sizzle and heal. She could feel her face lose its color, even as Lee and Gai started to pummel the beast. The thing could heal as well? With a deep breath she pulled herself up as Shino and Shibi came up beside her.

"Our attacks are not effective. How do I know this? Because we have only driven the creature back four feet and three inches," Shino said.

"The problem is the condensed skin and chakra surrounding it." Shibi said as he watched Lee and Gai weave in and out of the things attacks. "We need someone with the ability to hit it with either a highly condensed chakra attack or an overwhelming chakra attack."

"You mean a Raikiri or a Rasengan," Hinata said.

"Yes, unfortunately that is the case."

"I have something like that as well. It is unfinished, but it should provide enough force to pierce the armor like skin."

Shibi looked down at her with something akin to surprise… or at least as much as an Aburame shows surprise.

"Are you certain?"

"What Hinata says is true father. Why? Because, I have seen this attack myself. It is imperfect, but contains a similar piercing ability to what I would assume Kakashi-san's Raikiri has."

"Very well, Shino and I will blind the creature while Gai and Lee secure its arms."

Shibi disappeared in a swirl of bugs while Shino gave one last look at his teammate. She knew that look. It was one he used when he was worried. Most couldn't tell the difference, but being his friend for so long allowed her to pick out the subtle cues. He was concerned. She didn't blame him if the technique didn't work, she would be in the most vulnerable position. It didn't matter though. This was their only option. Kakashi was needed at headquarters and Naruto and Jiraiya were no where to be found. An Anbu may know and possible attack, but they weren't coming. No, it was up to her.

With a deep breath, she pushed her chakra out over her right hand until it was shaped like a shining sword. Her eyes locked on to the creature's heart and watched as the bugs covered its head. Lee and Gai zipped to either side of it and gripped its arms. They pulled back as hard as they could so that the creature's torso was completely unguarded. She could tell from the strain they had on their bodies that they were using the lower gates… and still struggling to hold the thing.

She blasted forward with everything she had as her hand reared back. There was no doubt in her mind that this was the only chance they had. With a small shout, she thrust her hand forward and plunged the chakra blade straight through the things heart to the point her own hand was within its massive chest. It gave a strangled gasp and started to go limp. She wasn't taking any chances though. Her technique was different from the others Shibi had mentioned. It was real blade, which meant it didn't just pierce. It cut.

She twisted her hand and went to pull it diagonally across the behemoths torso. There was no chance of recovery if it was severed in two. The blade cut cleanly… for a few inches. Suddenly, her hand was caught within its body. She tried to pull away, but the creature's insides gripped painfully tight. Suddenly a low growl sounded from its mouth and its orange eyes flickered back to life.

"Hinata get away!"

Gai's warning was cut short as he and Lee were flung away. Hinata barely had time to look up at it, and its victorious toothy sneer. Two cinderblock sized hands swung in from the outside, followed by a sickening crunch, and ended by the sound of something broken falling to the ground.

Naruto's eyes snapped open and he hopped to his feet without any thought to how his body may be. However, he was immediately aware of how well he could move. It was something he had taken for granted, being healthy. He quickly tested his limbs. Man he felt great! Wait until Kakashi-sensei got a load of him now. The tortu- training would be so one sided now. He looked around as Jiraiya and Tsunade groaned and started to sit up wearily.

"Naruto?"

The blonde turned toward his old sensei, who looked somewhere between confused and relieved. Naruto gave his patented grin as he folded his hand behind his head.

"The one and only." Naruto looked around at the mess that was the Hokage's office. Then as his focus returned he heard the panicked shouts from outside. His demeanor quickly turned more serious. "What's wrong?"

"We are under attack. So far, only one intruder has been confirmed, but it is powerful. We've lost a squad of jonin and numerous others have been hurt. Anbu are stationed by the walls and unable to assist."

"Why?"

"After Oto's attack, it was discovered that a great deal of damage came from sending the Anbu to one specific place, in that case the

arena. Only chunin were stationed at the walls, and thus it was easy for the invasion force to come in."

"Alright, I'll go."

"Hold it brat," Tsunade said as she stood up. "We have no idea of what's happened to you now that you are re-sealed."

"I feel great Baa-chan."

"That's irrelevant. Let the other ninja handle it-."

"Kakashi-sempai!" Yamato said with a tone laced with panic. "The thing has gotten past Shibi Aburame and his group. It's almost at the civilian district. Shibi and the others are in pursuit, but are having problems."

"What do you mean problems?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto felt his heart leap into his throat at the worried look Yamato threw at him.

"The creature has severely injured the ex-Hyuga heiress Hinata. It somehow has a grip on her, and they cannot risk a full assault on it. Although, Shibi states it wouldn't matter anyway. Hinata supposedly destroyed its heart, and it still kept going."

Naruto's eyes widened in fear and his feet were moving before he consciously knew they were carrying him. Tsunade grabbed the back of his jacket and yanked him back.

"You're staying put until we've made sure everything is fine."

Naruto knocked her hand away and looked at her angrily.

"I failed to save Sasuke and Sakura. There is no damn way I'm going to let that happen with Hinata! Get out of my way or come with me, it doesn't matter."

Tsunade glared down at him, but his defiant stare didn't flinch. She sighed and let go of him.

"Kakashi, go with him and make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

"You got it," Kakashi said as Naruto made his way over to the closest window.

He leapt up onto the frame and went to leap when a firm hand clamped down on his shoulder. Who the hell was interrupting him now. His head snapped around, but any words on his lips died instantly. There behind him, standing strong and authoritative, was the Yondaime Hokage.

"I'll take you there," Minato said.

Naruto's shock was quickly overshadowed by his annoyance.

"I don't need your help."

"Unless Konoha has changed significantly in sixteen years, the civilian district is five minutes from here."

"With Shunshin, I'll be there in two."

"And with Hiraishin, I can get you there in thirty seconds."

Naruto let out an annoyed sigh and turned to leave.

"Just stay out of my way once we get there. A zombie can't be much use in a fight."

Minato gave a tight smile and flung a kunai out the window and high into the air. The distance of the throw was impressive. Naruto felt himself engulfed in a yellow light, and then he was in the sky and the man was flinging another one. Just when he thought they would fall, the light came again. And in what seemed like only a moment, they were standing before a tall muscular man shaped monster. A frightened crowd of chunin and fleeing civilians were behind them. A

battered Gai and Lee rested on piles of rubble to their right. Shino and Shibi crouched down gasping for air to their left. And a broken Hinata dangled limply from the creature's chest.

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

I'm still not entirely happy with this chapter when dealing with Naruto himself. For those of you who don't remember, this chapter was the one I really had a problem with. There are a couple of sections where Naruto seemed to much in charge or lacking seriousness, but I honestly couldn't see him doing anything different that wouldn't take away his confidence or personality. The fox finds him interesting because of his brashness so being anything but would not have worked, and with the Shinigami… he picked the fight prematurely, but was still smart in how he handled it. In all, a little too close to being canon Naruto, but I worked with what the story provided. My Naruto still makes stupid mistakes, but he does learn from them.

A couple of people have mentioned the bleach aspect. The Naruto Death God always seemed very hollow-ish to me, and it was the only thing I could think of that would allow me to play with the mysterious Shiki Fujin. However, this story is not a bleach crossover (any reference to it has ended with this chapter).

And I ask for your patience with the Yondaime. His resurrection is explained next chapter, and I hope to have explained it in a very logical and detailed manner. In short, it will make sense when you consider very little of the seal has been explained in canon. It's about as mysterious as… well I better not go there.

Also, I would like to apologize for the two missed updates. I have completed the first draft of the story in its entirety (200 plus pages from this point in 2 weeks while actually still working at the dojo, etc.) But, it is done and I will not miss anymore updates. Since all of you

have been very patient. I will also be updating Wednesday, so you'll get three updates this week.

Flicker

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 15:

Kakashi's mouth hung open, although his mask hid it from view. He could have sworn his sensei had been there for a moment… and Naruto did not look happy about it. Had something happened to his mind? He had tried to cancel out a genjutsu when he first saw the Yondaime, but it had done nothing. What was going on?

"Would anyone mind filling me in on why my sensei is back from the dead?" Kakashi asked as calmly as he could.

"It has something to do with the fact that Kyubi was split with the two seals," Jiraiya said as he leafed through some notes he had scattered around. "I had thought that it was odd how perfectly preserved Minato's body had been."

"Given that the Shiki Fujin only removes the soul and does not damage the body, it does seem plausible that if the body was unharmed the soul could renter it," Tsunade said as she crossed her arms. "Coupled with the mystery that is the Shiki Fujin and the potency of the Kyubi's chakra… I am not entirely in disbelief."

"So you were expecting for something like this to happen?" Kakashi asked.

"No." Jiraiya shook his head. "I assumed Naruto's and Minato's seals would resonate with each other since they both housed part of the Kyubi. However, I had no idea it was to such a degree that it would have resulted in us being sucked into the Shinigami, and even less so, in bringing the dead back to life."

"Minato may not have been completely dead," Tsunade said more to herself than anyone else. However, the other two gave her their full attention. "With as quickly as Minato was put away in his tomb for security reasons, and the lack of a decent medic on site, I doubt he received a thorough autopsy. Given the complete lack of degeneration, I am led to assume he was placed more in a state of stasis than death."

"Does that mean usage of the Shiki Fujin could be reversed," Kakashi asked.

"No, the only reason that there was no degeneration was because of the split of the Kyubi's chakra with Naruto. I believe it is possible that the seals siphoned life energy from Naruto to preserve Minato. However, until I can examine both of them, everything is merely conjecture."

Kakashi shook his head and looked out the window as a familiar chakra spiked to outrageous levels. Naruto and his sensei fighting a single opponent? Slowly, he reached into his jacket's pocket and pulled out his book. Yes… reading would be good now.

Had it ever been this easy to merge their chakras together? It seemed so simple, like second nature. Even when there hadn't been interference in the past, it was still an act of precisely measuring the mixture. Now, it was almost as easy as solely pulling from his reserves. He looked down at his clawed hands through the purple cloak. The color was a shade lighter than before and the chakra felt different. Even when he mixed it before, any chakra that the Kyubi had a part in felt aggressive, like it wanted to destroy everything around it.

This chakra was similar and without question the Kyubi's, but it was more subdued. It was just as powerful, but it seemed calmer. It was still vile, but it didn't go out of its way to show it. If his old half was a ravaging fire, then this was an all consuming cold. However, the primary difference was his ability to control it. He wasn't sure if it was

due to the chakra's nature, or if it was just because the Kyubi's consciousness was no longer around.

His head snapped up as the creature before him stared down at him with an almost curious expression. Whatever this power was, he was going to use it to tear that thing apart. He knew the villagers were looking at him, and he wouldn't doubt that they were regaining their fear and disgust of him. A fox form with five swinging tails wasn't exactly subtle. It pained him to reveal this form after all this time trying to separate himself from it. But, he needed to save Hinata and that thing needed to be put down. If they couldn't accept him for that, then he'd just start over again. What was another sixteen years if it meant Hinata would be okay?

He charged forward as bits of the road tore up from his footprints. He used his Shunshin to warp right next to Hinata as his cloak enveloped her like a protective shield. His tails ensnared the things arms and he quickly shoved his clawed hand into the beast's chest. He gripped Hinata's hand and yanked it out before he leapt back. His eyes refused to drift down, as if seeing her would break his heart. He just turned to the Yondaime with a steel gaze and held her up to him.

"Please… get her to the hospital. That is the only thing I will ever ask of you."

Minato nodded and gently took the still form from Naruto's blood stained arms. The older blonde disappeared in a flash of light, and Naruto turned to stare at the gathered crowd. They all showed a myriad of emotions though surprisingly nothing hostile. However, everyone had some degree of curiosity in their gaze. He forced himself to stand up tall and proud as he said a silent prayer his voice wasn't to rough.

"I need the chunin to grab the wounded and clear a path. I'm going to knock this bastard back into whatever hole he came out of. The rest of you should probably get back." He faced the thing with his back to the crowd. "I'm sorry you had to see me like this. I guess I can never truly get you to forget what I hold."

With a shout, he launched himself forward and summoned a Rasengan into his hand. The purple energy swirled vibrantly as he slammed it into the creature's punch. The attacks collided and a massive shockwave of energy pulsed from the collision. Naruto used his left chakra claw to slash upwards and knock the beast high into the air. He leapt after it as he summoned a massive army of clones. They launched themselves high into the air and landed a barrage of punches.

"Uzumaki Naruto Nisen Rendan!" They chorused as they collided with the beast.

The possessed monster roared and a massive burst of chakra exploded off of it dispelling all the clones. Naruto didn't care as he fell down from above the thing… a demon infused Odama Rasengan spinning in his palm. The beast looked up just in time to have Naruto slam the massive sphere in its face.

The reborn Jinchuriki gave an angry shout, and Jugo was blasted straight for the ground. The hulking body crashed in a violent quake and made a huge smoking crater. Naruto landed panting as one of the tails dissipated. Keeping this many tails up was almost as much work as fighting. A frown grew on his face. That thing wasn't done yet. Normally, the Odama Rasengan felt like it was burrowing in to its target when it hit. That sensation was absent during the last collision. Oh, he'd hit the bastard hard, but it wouldn't take long for it to climb back out. If it could handle whatever the other group could throw at it, then he had to step it up.

He looked down at his palms. That technique was distinctly Kyubi's. He wasn't sure if he could do it now that the fox wasn't in him anymore, especially since it had only been his four tailed state that had used it. His eyes glanced up as a figure emerged from the smoke. It wasn't like he had a choice though. Whatever that guy was, it had almost as much chakra as he was currently putting out… and it was like a dense armor. It repelled almost everything and healed whatever actually hit.

He summoned two clones, each one sporting a tail. They took off and started combating the creature as Naruto brought his hands together. This would need the purest demonic chakra he could gather, and it would need to by hyper condensed. It also was dependent upon his clones getting that thing up in the air again… which the beast seemed hell bent on preventing.

Shaking his head and emptying his thoughts, he started pulling the darkest chakra he could find within the seal. It slowly worked its way through his system like a cold goop and seeped into the small Rasengan in his palms. Black chakra leaked into the orb and his brow furrowed in strain as he struggled to press it tighter and tighter as more dark chakra was pushed into it.

The creatures roar almost caused him to lose focus, but through sheer force of will, he kept it together and looked up. His two clones crept low under the creature's strikes and dove under its feet. They blew up and the monster was sent spiraling high into the air. Naruto held the dark ball in front of him as he aimed. For a moment, a sense of sadness washed over him as the name of the attack echoed in his mind. To him, it was almost like the last barrier between him and the Kyubi. It was as if by launching this… he would be not different from a demon. A tailed beast's feared and signature move.

"Imari."

A massive beam of black and red chakra shot from his hands, almost exactly like the one his four tailed form had used against Orochimaru. However, he kept it more focused to reduce damage to the village. Although, anything within twenty feet was vaporized. The creature sneered and flung its claws forward as it summoned a wave of chakra. It was futile. Jugo was fully engulfed by the blast in less than a second.

Naruto's fox cloak dissipated, and he collapsed to his knees as his chest heaved. He couldn't stop his body from shaking no matter how hard he tried. Slowly, his hands twisted towards his face so he could look down at them. They were charred and smoldering as rapidly

drying blood dripped from between the cracks. The amount of pain prevented him from moving them. The air itself felt like a thousand knives stabbing into them.

He stood carefully as he held his trembling hands away from him. He turned and froze as the dumbstruck crowd from before stared at him. They looked around at the destruction before staring directly at him. A nervous sweat ran down the back of his neck as their eyes drifted down to his hands and then back to him. They had seen it all. They had seen… that.

"Are you alright?"

Naruto glanced to his right as Minato stared down at his hands with a frown. He fought back a wince and moved his hands against down to his sides. He didn't need for the Yondaime to be concerned about him. He hadn't been up to that point so there was no point to start now.

"I'm fine. Thank you for saving Hinata." Naruto started to walk towards the crowd who had just begun taking notice of the strange newcomer.

"You should go too. Get your hands looked at."

"Thank you for your concern, I'm okay though. There are enough people in need of help that can't heal on their own."

Naruto got closer to the crowd and could here the whispers as the onlookers gossiped amongst themselves. He refused to let his head drop. His decisions were not things he would regret. Not when it kept everyone safe.

"Holy crap… Naruto's awesome!"

Naruto's eyes widened as the first voice reached his ears and it caused him to stop cold.

"With powers like that, Konoha's going to safer than ever."

"I know. He's completely made a tame puppy out of that blasted fox."

He stood there shocked still as the secret praises grew in number.

"How is the Yondaime here?"

"Who cares? With those two, we're unbeatable."

"They look really similar don't they?"

He used a quick Shunshin and disappeared into a deserted alleyway. His feet carried him aimlessly to the far end deep within the shadows as his lips trembled. He rested his forehead on the cool cement wall of the closest building… and smiled.

"Danzo-sama. We have just received word that Jugo has been defeated soundly by the Nine Tails."

Danzo's one good eye cracked open, and he looked down at the agent kneeling before him. So the Jinchuriki had been retrieved, and is still alive and causing trouble? What a problematic child.

"How successful was Jugo in crippling Konoha's ability to fight?" Danzo asked.

"Negligible my lord. The majority of the damage to the outer wall will most likely be repaired by this time. Rumor also has it that the exiled Hyuga heiress and several others managed to delay Jugo's assault until Uzumaki could arrive."

"That is unfortunate, but ultimately unimportant. I had decided to use Jugo on a whim. Is that all?"

"My lord… the Hyuga girl. From what I heard, her eyes were very different from the Byakugan. Do you think that they had it removed… or possible evolved?"

Danzo's eye widened barely enough to signify a reaction. Evolution of the all seeing eyes? Now that was something that could prove most beneficial to Konoha. Given the girls secretive relationship with that woman, it was not completely unbelievable to assume that the eyes may have been tampered with. His mind expertly raced over all the possible options and their probable consequences in a matter of seconds. He stood, and every agent in the room immediately gave him their full attention.

"Number forty-four," Danzo said as he looked down at the agent that had reported to him. "You are to take a small team back to Konoha and discern what has happened to the Hyuga girl's eyes. If it determined that the eyes are now a genetic trait, or at least can be replicated with study, bring the girl here. Also, retrieve Might Gai's student Rock Lee. The boy has an ability to use the Inner Gates with limited consequence. Make sure your presence is unknown and return here swiftly."

"Yes sir!"

The agent disappeared in a blur of dust as Danzo turned over to the agent on his right.

"Fu, has Karin become more willing to cooperate?"

"I do not know my lord. We have yet to remove her from the cells."

"She has had enough I would assume. If she is willing to help us, have her cleaned up and given a generous meal. Although, make sure it is after you have at least the most vital of the information."

"And if she does not cooperate?"

"Use your own abilities to rip the information from her mind. Be careful, Orochimaru no doubt placed many significant hazards to guard her. It was one of the reasons I wished to deal with her this way. I cannot afford to lose your abilities."

"Thank you my lord. I will not fail you."

"I am sure that you will not." Danzo turned to his left. "Torune, I assume the preparations are complete."

"Yes, Danzo-sama."

"Then you have my permission to take the lead in this next mission. It is time Suna makes amends for their failed invasion during the chunin exam three years ago. I will not be so weak as to let them skim by on the promise of being an ally."

"How much does Naruto know?" Minato asked as he sat on the windowsill of the Hokage's office.

"Everything," Jiraiya said before he took a sip of sake. "We told him everything. I wasn't planning to tonight of all nights, but it is what it is."

"Tonight?"

"Tsunade and I had tried to tell him a little while ago, but our meeting was interrupted. Due to more pressing events, we didn't get another chance. For some reason, tonight he charged in and demanded answers."

"That would be my fault," Kakashi said as he looked up from his book. "I had asked him how the conversation went, not knowing it never did. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. The whole thing is just one big mess of bad timing."

"Does he hate me?" Minato asked and looked at his teacher. "He seemed rather offended by my presence."

Kakashi and Jiraiya shared a look, before the latter sighed.

"I don't know if it is possible for Naruto to hate someone. However, he's been on an emotional rollercoaster for over two weeks now. The fact that not an hour after finding out the truth about his parents he had to face one of them… he really can't be blamed for giving you the cold shoulder."

Minato sighed and scratched his head.

"I really made things difficult for him didn't I? Of course, I didn't expect Kushina to be drafted for a long term mission. We had talked about it, but I figured Sarutobi-san would keep her close."

"There wasn't a lot of choice in the matter on anyone's part. People were still terrified after what happened with the Kyubi that they became obsessed with a safe haven if the village fell. Kushina's homeland was the only reasonable choice, and she was the only candidate for leading the mission."

Minato's semi-hopeful smile faded. He looked down and Jiraiya could sense the hesitation from his previous student.

"Did he grow up completely alone?"

"Yeah."

Jiraiya had seen many things in his life. He had seen children die and hardened ninjas crap themselves. He had seen families torn apart, and families reunited. However, he had never seen Minato lose his eternal cool. So when the blonde man punched the concrete wall again and again, he honestly could not do anything but watch as the pristine white was stained with smudges of red.

Tsunade let out a tired sigh as she checked over Hinata's chart one last time. Her eyes were slightly strained from reading it in the dark, but she didn't dare do anything that would disturb the girl. She set the chart back wearily. This girl amazed her almost as much as Naruto. In the middle of that thing's attack, she had performed a

makeshift Kaiten. It had been incomplete, but not entirely ineffective. She was still alive, and if the next few days were as promising as hoped, she would make a full recovery. If she hadn't done anything… they would have needed a shovel.

However, she was far from out of the woods. The next few days were critical to making sure she survived, and could continue to grow. Right now, chances were in the high fifty percents. Each day, those odds would get better… or worse. She sighed again and turned to leave when her instincts flared to life. Her fist tightened as she prepared to strike out at whoever was in the room with them.

"It's just me Baa-chan," Naruto said quietly. "I- I promise I won't stay long. I just wanted to make sure she was okay."

A grin tugged at her lips and she relaxed as she moved over to him.

"You know, they say the kiss from a hero can awaken the damsel."

"Shut up Baa-chan," Naruto whispered half heartedly.

She watched as he stood over Hinata sadly.

"You made it to her just in time Naruto. She'll be okay because of you."

"If I hadn't had lost my temper, then she wouldn't be here at all."

"Normally, I would agree." She saw him wince. "However as always, luck played in your favor. You never would have defeated that thing without Kyubi's other half, and the village would not have their Yondaime back."

"Maybe."

Tsunade glanced down at his hands and frowned. She could see the damage to the palms between the sloppy self-applied bandages. The brat was trying to take care of his own injuries now huh? She couldn't allow that. It'd put her out of a job.

"Let me see your hands."

"What?"

"No arguing."

He didn't and held them up like a child that had been scolded.

"Please tell me you at least put some type of medicinal ointment on before your pathetic bandaging job."

"I did. Hinata made sure I had a jar before I started training with Kakashi. The stuff works like a miracle."

She almost smiled. That was true.

"Regardless, you should have let a medic-nin check up on you."

"I wasn't sure how busy the hospital was after the attack. I can heal on my own. So I wasn't worried about it."

"Sounds to me more like you're on a guilt trip."

He looked up at her with a pair of disbelieving eyes. She'd apparently hit the nail on the head. His eyes drifted back down toward Hinata.

"That's not it. I'm just frustrated. I always feel like I'm arriving too late. I'm not stupid Baa-chan. I know that things will happen that I can't change, but why does it always feel like it's my friends I'm letting down? Why am I always too late to protect them?"

"I'm afraid you're asking the wrong person brat." She pushed her healing chakra into his hands and watched as the skin mended. "However, you did protect a lot of people today, Hinata included. In this world, most people wouldn't have gotten even that much."

Naruto remained silent as she continued to rebuild the damaged tissue. Part of her felt for him. She had been in the same place with

Dan and Nawaki. Every humane ninja felt that sense of hopelessness at one time or another. The feeling of being dragged in the tide of death. Given the fact that he had to work harder than most in acquiring loved ones, their possible loss was probably more than he could handle.

"I will need you in my office tomorrow afternoon. You seem to be fine, but I want to run a full checkup on you to be safe. After that, you should continue your training with Kakashi for another week. If he gives the okay, I will then start having you work with your new team."

"Okay."

"I will also let you know if anything happens with Hinata. Since you are her roommate, you are her emergency contact."

"Thanks."

She canceled the healing technique and let go of his hands. He glanced down at them and made a fist several times to test their dexterity. A frown crept onto her face as she watched his solemn gaze trail back to Hinata. With a growl, she swatted him upside the head. He yelped and grabbed the back of his head.

"You are Naruto Uzumaki the future Hokage correct?"

He blinked as a perplexed look appeared on his face.

"Yeah."

"Then why am I not seeing your unwavering determination? I was under the impression you were too stupid to realize that things could not be changed." She turned on her heel and started to walk out. "I didn't give my necklace to you because you were a good ninja, since you were far from one. I gave it to you because you were stupid. Remember that."

Agent Forty-four leapt silently through the dense forest of Hi no Kuni… her home. Well, it wasn't really her home, not after what happened three years ago. The home she had loved had died with the attack from Oto. It had died when her loved ones had. It had died when her leaders refused to exact justice on the heads of their enemies. Oto was left alone, and Suna was even turned into an ally! That was the punishment Konoha's enemies received? Friendship and the turning of the other cheek were the village's form of justice? Where was the retribution? Where were the heads of those who attacked them? No where, that was the answer. The leaders of Konoha had no desire and no ability to exact justice.

She had begged and pleaded with that infuriating Hokage. Her vocal chords had become hoarse and sore from screaming for blood. Yet, she was ignored and taken off active duty under the pretense she was unable to be trusted due to mental stress. It was a bitter poison that had been poured down her throat as they rubbed salt deeply into her wounds. It was because of this that she had sought out Danzo, the rival of the Sandaime. He promised a grand future for Konoha. He promised justice and punishment. He promised that she could be a part of it. That her revenge could be realized.

Her loyalty had been his within the first minute. She had worked tirelessly for him and his vision. Her abilities and drive had helped her grow quickly in Root to the point she was nearing the prestige of Fu and Torune. If there was a mission to be done, she accomplished it quickly, flawlessly, and without hesitation. The only time she questioned him was when he explained his plans for Suna. She had not been included in reigning down punishment upon them. Yet, Danzo had been calm and understanding. He was firm in his choices and would not bend to her pleas, but… there was a kindness in his refusal. His logic was irrefutable, and he took the time to explain it to her.

He was not the cruel man Konoha had painted him as. His tactics were harsh and unforgiving, but they were effective. If there was a threat, it was removed decisively. If an enemy brought harm,

repayment was collected. If there was weakness, it was cut out. At one time, she would have detested the cold logic he was infamous for. She had been raised under the Sandaime's influence and cherished the standard that Konoha had placed upon itself. However, moral greatness did not bring back the dead. Being forgiving did not ease the pain of loss.

She would have remained loyal to the Hokage if it had been the Sandaime. Sarutobi was kind, but ultimately would require restitution. He wouldn't brush the incident aside like that drunken spoiled princess they now called Hokage. He wouldn't have made them allies because one Jinchuriki befriended the other. Danzo would not have been so uncaring had he been put in charge. He actually loved the village, unlike that selfish vagrant they now followed.

Yet, it was not philosophy that had ultimately led to her change of heart. It was something simple, and something that only Danzo had despite his cold mentality. He was fair. A strangely common thing that was startlingly absent from Konoha's leadership. Fairness was something that she sought. It was at the core of Danzo's beliefs. Everyone in the village got a chance if they could pull their own weight. Everyone got what their actions had earned. It was why people like Fu and Torune had become something like sons to the old man. They worked the hardest and showed the most loyalty. So, they were treated like something more than a replaceable commodity. It was fair, and after everything she had been through, a little fairness was worth giving everything.

Shino pushed his hands down deeper into his coat pockets. The added pull on his shoulders gave him a sense of calm. It also served to remind him of the metaphysical weight he had on them. The same weight he had always found more along the lines of an embrace rather than a burden. It was a weight he had developed for many years with his teammates. The weight was one of responsibility. The

responsibility to be there for them, to look after them. He had made his shoulders strong enough to hold up the responsibility.

He had trained with them and fought with them. Even though he now had a new team, the weight didn't lessen. Instead, it grew with the added responsibility of having others to care for. He was so grateful for that weight and would never want to be rid of it. However, tonight had been a devastating lesson. He found the strength to carry that weight leave him and his confidence along with it.

They had lost. No… they had been utterly crushed. To add insult to injury, he had been almost entirely ineffective. Of the five in their group, he had been the weakest. He already knew he was not his father's match and assumed Gai was of a similar caliber. However, Hinata and Lee had blown him away. Their power, while ineffective, had shown just how blind he had been. He was not strong, not to the degree that he needed to be.

He had always considered himself strong and always desired to test that against a strong opponent. He was far from arrogant, but confident that he could handle the majority of opponents he would face, and given time, he would surpass his father. Tonight had shown him differently. Despite his intellect and abilities, the only thing he would have been able to accomplish was removing Hinata's arm to save her life. If Naruto had arrived ten seconds later, he would have had to sever her ensnared limb. His hands tensed in his pockets, and he pushed harder to the point the stitches started to strain.

Of course, it had been someone else that had saved her. Of course, it had been someone else to stop that thing. It seemed that was always the case as of late. Jealous wasn't the right term to describe what he was feeling. It wasn't even that he was angry or guilt ridden. Rather, for the first time in his life, he was lost. There was a precipice that he wished to climb up to, but there was no path to be seen. Naruto, Lee, and Hinata had all reached that point. The question was how?

How had they achieved that growth? It was more than hard work, special teachers, or natural talent. He wanted to achieve that same level of growth not only for himself, but also for Hinata. Hinata… she was a remarkable individual and he loved her to death. It wasn't a romantic love. Rather, it was completely the opposite. He was an only child, but he viewed her as close to a sister as possible. Watching her struggle and grow filled him with a sense of pride, especially knowing that he had helped in that growth.

His teeth clenched. Yet, the only thing he had been able to do was harm her. To save her life, he would have had to strip away her hard work. That was all he could have done. That realization had slammed into him with as much force as the monster's fists. He had reached a plateau and it would cost his team in the future. Shikamaru could keep up due to his genius intellect. Though difficult, he could keep up with enough struggles, but he didn't want to keep up. He wanted be someone that could offer real support, not the one being supported.

"You seem to be letting your thoughts consume you, Shino," his father said as he walked up behind him. "Despite your fears, do not lose your composure."

"I'm sorry father."

Shino forced himself to relax on the surface. As an Aburame, and the pride of the clan's son, he could not display failures in control. It was his responsibility to always appear tranquil and serious.

"What is our clan's philosophy on emotion?"

"To feel is the way of people, to focus ones feelings is the way of the Aburame."

"Yes, do not apologize for what you are feeling. This is good that you have those you care for. However, focus it in order to help those people, and hide it to prevent your enemies from using it against you."

"Yes father."

"You are upset with the outcome of today's battle, yes."

Shino could only nod in shame.

"This is good."

"Father?"

"You have never lost before. Now that you have, you will be able to go much further. Come, your uncle wishes to speak with you."

Gaara rubbed his eyes groggily as the rising sun slowly crept up. He scratched his disheveled red hair and walked over to his window to watch the sun rise. From the looks of it, he'd managed to get three hours of restful sleep last night. It had been slow going, but he had gradually gained extra minutes to his slumber over the past few months. In several years, he may actually be able to sleep a night away. A small grin tugged at his lips as his people started to leave their homes and go about their business for the day. It was picturesque with the orange glow of the morning sun and so peaceful.

His eyes narrowed as a flare unexpectedly popped up from the protective cliffs at the village entrance. In a swirl of sand, he was carried out across the village and over the rocky barrier. He landed quietly by Baki, who had a grim frown on his face. Gaara didn't bother to ask what was wrong. He could plainly see the problem himself. Stretched out across the sandy desert was a massive wave of grey skin and dark swirling chakra. An army of ninja, rapidly activating something startling similar to Orochimaru's cursed seal.

"Baki," Gaara said calmly as he lifted his hands up into the air.

"Yes?"

"Evacuate the village as quickly as possible."

A massive wave of sand rose up in front of the village and raced straight for the invading army. The front line released a barrage of Katon jutsu rendering the sand into fragile glass. Gaara's face never changed. He had expected something like that to happen. The curse seal was frighteningly powerful and multiplied the user's power much higher than normally possible. He had fought one of them before, and it had been one of the most challenging of his life. An entire army… that was not possible for him to stop. It was not possible for his ninja to stop. He needed to preserve his forces. Victory would come another day.

"Kages preserve us," Baki said in a nervous whisper.

"Now Baki, take everyone and whatever they can carry quickly, and head to Konoha. Tell them… tell them Suna has fallen."

Gaara went to leap out into the desert, but Baki reached out and slapped a paper seal upon his back. His entire body went rigid, and he collapsed to the ground. He struggled to move as his vision began to fade and Baki looked down at him.

"I am sorry, Gaara."

Fu sucked in a deep breath and released a wave of fire that incinerated the body on the ground before him. The Karin woman had still feigned ignorance and only offered trivial bits of knowledge. Futility was the sum of her actions. He had dug into her mind and ripped apart the barriers the snake-nin had put in place. It was disheartening. She was not willing to cooperate. He had seen all aspects of her mind and could say that she was the exact kind of person in need of Danzo-sama's leadership.

Her life was a sad one, like many in the ninja world. She truly needed a place to belong, which was exactly what Root would have offered her. However, she chose to side with Orochimaru to the end,

and her shattered mind was the price of such loyalty. It didn't matter, his master would have the information he sought. Yet, he felt a small pang of regret that he could not have shepherded one more lost soul to Danzo-sama's flock.

Shaking such fleeting thoughts from his head, he made his way to the exit. Orochimaru's secrets were now his leaders. A new age was dawning for Konoha, and he would be sure to see its completion.

Naruto's mouth hung open to a comical degree as he stared out at the crater he had made in the ground. That had not been what he had been expecting from his techniques completion. Well, complete was not the proper word. He still had far too much difficulty summoning it, and he wasted far too much chakra for it to be useful. The idea of using a shuriken shape had been awesome if he said so himself. Although, his aim left a lot to be desired.

He sat down and took in all the damage the technique had caused. It was fearsome to be sure. However, what had him more in shock was not how much damage this technique created. It was that he now knew how to push the shape and element fusion even further. He honestly wasn't even sure if there was a point in doing so. There were few, if any, enemies he was aware of that could handle this technique, let alone something more. He shook his head and stood. Regardless, this one needed to be perfected first.

"It would seem your training is a success," Kakashi said as he walked up next to him. "Well done Naruto."

"Thanks Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said with a happy grin. "It definitely made the past two days worth it."

"Yes, I wish that you had actually slept in those two days. You have to be beyond exhausted."

"Not really," Naruto said as he stretched his hand over his head. "I've been so excited about this technique that I don't think I could have

tried to sleep if I had wanted to."

"Maybe, but now that you have a firm grasp of it. You should head home and rest."

"Aw come on Kakashi-sensei! We've got to get this technique battle ready through some of your intensive training."

"We will Naruto, I promise." Kakashi's eye smiled. "I'm not going to let you use your training as an excuse to hide from your father or not going to see Hinata."

"That's not what I-."

"See you tomorrow Naruto, get some rest."

Kakashi disappeared in a plume of smoke as Naruto stood there completely bewildered. The blonde grumbled incoherently as he wrapped chakra around himself and used a Shunshin to send him flying forward. He supposed the copy-nin was right. Regardless of how energized he felt, not sleeping was stupid. He didn't want to get raccoon eyes like Gaara.

Ten Shunshin later, he landed on the window leading into his apartment. He crawled in and immediately went to the kitchen as his stomach growled loudly. Better get something to eat before dozing off. Ignoring the desire to see if Hinata had experimented with another recipe, he reached up into the cabinet and grabbed a small container of instant ramen. His hands worked along absently, long ago memorizing the steps it took, as his eyes roamed the small apartment. He never would have thought it could seem so… empty.

A knock on the door startled him from his thoughts. He set the ramen down reluctantly and went over to the door. He yanked it open and bit back a curse when he saw who was at the door. The Yondaime stood at the threshold with a bag of ramen he recognized from Ichiraku's. The older man had a grin just shy of nervous pasted onto

his face. Naruto eyes immediately cut to the bandaged hand hid slightly behind the long trench coat.

"What happened to your hand?" Naruto asked with a mild curiosity.

"I had a little run in with a wall. The Hiraishin technique can be a little hazardous if you get rusty."

"Oh… did you need something?"

"Well." Minato held up the bag. "I wanted to talk to you a little. Sensei said you like ramen, so I hoped it could help break the ice."

Naruto glanced at the bag warily. The bastard had discovered his greatest weakness. He had no choice but to follow his whims… for now. Once the ramen was his then he could escape.

"Do what you want. I was training for the past few days so I'll want to pass out soon."

"That's fine."

Minato stepped inside and looked around. His faced seemed to dance with a sense of recognition. Naruto pulled out a chair from the table and then grabbed one himself. He wasn't happy about seeing the resurrected Hokage, and he really wasn't sure if he ever would be. But, it would be wrong not to listen to him. There was close to zero chance that his feelings would change, but at least he would have given the man a chance.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"You probably have questions, or at least want to chew me out. I wanted to give you that chance."

"There's no need." Naruto grabbed a container of ramen from the bag and peeled off the top. "You did what you had to do. I understand that."

"You still seem pretty upset."

"I just don't want to be bothered with it." He ignored the slightly pained look that flickered across the Yondaime's face. "I have more important things to worry about right now. With Danzo and the Akatsuki running around, worrying about people I was never supposed to meet would be stupid."

"That's respectable, but I don't buy it."

Naruto glanced up from his noodles.

"I'm not asking you to. I don't actually care whether you do or not. You don't have the right to ask things about me. Who I am, what I think. Unless it deals with the village's safety, it is none of your business. If it helps ease your conscience, then realize I turned out fine on my own. Nothing else should matter to you."

Silence enveloped the apartment as Naruto went back to timidly eating the meal in front of him. Minato stared down at his son with a contemplative look, as if calculating his next move. Finally, he stood, which caught Naruto's attention.

"I know you have a lot going on right now so I won't push you. That doesn't mean I'm going to drop this though." Naruto's brow scrunched up with an unspoken question. "I have a lot to answer for Naruto. I have a lot to prove to you. Your mom does as well."

"You don't owe me anything." Naruto forced a smile to his face. "You really don't. You put the village first, that was your job as the Hokage. You don't have to explain anything to me."

Minato looked at him seriously.

"I am going east to Uzu no Kuni to bring Kushina back with me."

Naruto nearly choked on the half chewed ramen he had started chewing on.

"What?"

"You deserve the right to meet with both of us and vent. Whether you choose to be done with us after it, that's your choice and you have every reason to. But, do it after you are absolutely sure there is nothing for us to offer."

Lee panted as he jumped again and swung his weighted leg up. His focus was on the beast. It was terrifyingly strong, and he didn't have enough power to damage it. He knew that had he unleashed his true abilities the results would have been different. However, he didn't want to always have to resort to the gates every time he faced a powerful opponent. He wasn't Sasuke and wouldn't be dependent upon something that gave him an edge over his enemies.

Ignoring his thoughts, his punches and kicks intensified. The tempo and speed of the strikes grew until the air reverberated with sounds similar to a bullwhip being snapped. Every movement produced the sound, but he drove himself harder. So focused was he in surpassing his limit, that he never saw the two figures emerge from the ground and shower a barrage of shimmering senbon into his back. He gasped out as he felt a cool liquid flow into his bloodstream, and then sleep over took him.

Agent forty-four slipped into Hinata's hospital room and quickly dispatched of the doctor checking her chart, with one clean slice of the throat. She let him drop to the floor gently so there was no sound signifying his death. Daytime missions were always risky. It was easier to be spotted, but everyone's guards were lowered. In this case, it didn't matter. They had already spent enough time here to gain the information. It was time for them to return. She turned away from the dead doctor as the other two agents with her climbed in and made their way over to Hinata's bed. Forty-four came up next to them and glanced down through her mask at the heavily bandaged girl.

"If we move her now, she may not survive the journey to Oto," the taller of the agents whispered. "It wouldn't matter if we only needed her blood, but the fact that you want her for breeding-."

"She will survive if you are careful, and we can heal any damage when we arrive back to Danzo-sama. Fu has no doubt gained all of the information about Orochimaru's experiments. If we must, we will use them on this girl."

"As you wish Forty-four."

"Let's move quickly."

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

A special thank you to everyone who has placed this story or myself on their alert/farvorites lists. I hadn't really looked until recently and was surprised at how many there were.

Anyway, hope that everything was explained adequetly in this chapter, and that there was a degree of logic to it.

I'm really trying to make Naruto's reactions believable with his parents. He's forgiving to a fault, but it does have to hurt considering what his past was like. I promise though I will try to keep his personality in mind, and I promise not to make him too angst ridden. One Sasuke was more than enough.

I'm also excited about many of the things coming up soon, and very interested in how you respond to Kushina and Shino's uncle.

Aside from that, posted a new Breathe last night if anyone is interested. First one since October.

Enjoy and see you Saturday.

Shock

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 16:

Sweat dripped off Shino's body as his chest heaved in the dark. His tattered clothes were caked with mud, blood, and regretfully, vomit. Had he known this was what his uncle had wanted him for, more preparation would have occurred. His sharp brown eyes glared through the remains of his shattered sunglasses. They were fixated on the man lying lazily on the rocky outcropping high above him. Being dragged into an underground chamber in the middle of the night had not been what he had been expecting when he went to see his uncle. All he had been asked was if he wanted to gain strength. He had responded in the affirmative, and was led to a trap hatch hidden deep within the Aburame family gardens.

"Ne, nephew-chan, you aren't tired already are you?" The man asked as he glanced down through his round sunglasses.

The man twirled a grass reed between his teeth as he folded his hands behind his head. Shino could barely make out the man in the dark, especially since he wore the same colored cloak the rest of his clan did. Only the polished wooden sandals his uncle wore shimmered in the man made cave.

"Uncle, I have been fighting you for two days. How do I know this? Because, my Kikaichu have told me."

"No you haven't."

"What?"

The older man kicked his feet over the edge so that he sat up. I blinding grin stretched across his face.

"I said, you haven't fought me for two days."

"Impossible, I have kept count of how many generations have been born and not detected any form of genjutsu."

"Ne, nephew-chan." His uncle vanished suddenly. Shino froze as he felt a presence appear right behind him. "You aren't listening. The only thing that has come after me are your Kikaichu. You haven't attacked me once nephew-chan."

"There is no difference."

"Oh really?"

The uncle looked over the rim of his glasses. His eyes produced a dangerous glint. In one swift movement, his hand snapped out and his connected with Shino's back. The younger Aburame was sent flying forward as the wind was forced from his lungs. He bounced along the ground and crashed into one of the multiple stone stalagmites that lined the ground.

"Ne, nephew-chan, did that feel like an attack from a bug?"

Shino coughed painfully as he peeled himself off of the rock formation. His uncle's grin hadn't diminished. Like a Cheshire cat in the night, those bright teeth and polished sunglasses taunted him. The man was indeed powerful, much more so than he had ever suspected.

His uncle, Shinji, was the black sheep of the family. He was excessively flamboyant by Aburame standards, although Shino assumed it was still considered reserved to the majority of the public. Shinji was also extremely talkative and rarely serious. He spent his time in his underground room playing with his bugs and digging out a bigger cave. The thought that the man would have been a capable

fighter never seemed plausible. The fact that Shino wasn't sure his father would match him was unbelievable.

"Tell you what nephew-chan, I'll give you a little hint with this question. Do you control the Kikaichu, or do they control you?"

Shino forced himself to stand tall even as his knees threatened to give out.

"It is mostly symbiosis. I house them, and I direct them where to attack. They provide their abilities in return."

"Wrong my dear little knucklehead. If you do it right, you are the master of them, the queen of the colony." Shinji covered his mouth and sputtered in laughter. "Ha Shino-chan is a queen! Oh, how distraught Shibi will be when he hears how his son has turned into one of those types."

"I am not what you are referring to."

"You should really spend more time with girls nephew-chan, then people won't get these ideas about you."

"The only one with these foolish idea's are you, Uncle."

"Sure, sure it can be our little secret okay, nephew-chan."

"What is the purpose of this training?"

Shinji sighed, and started to walk around aimlessly.

"You are thick aren't you? I'm trying to teach you how to become more powerful. But, you got to think outside of that little box you've caged yourself in."

Shino kept his eyes trained on his shifty uncle even as his mind tried to decipher the man's words. Not once had he seen the man use his Kikaichu. Yet, his own attacks were rebuffed entirely. The same thing happened when he sparred with his father. Although in that case, it

was because his father's hive was more advanced… no that wasn't it. His father also had a far superior chakra capacity. That was one of the reasons why his father was so feared. He could control an insurmountable amount of Kikaichu, direct them with unsurpassed mastery, and had developed them to the point of withstanding an uncountable amount of obstacles.

"You're thinking about Shibi and his abilities right?" Shinji said as he put his hands in his pockets. "I bet that you don't know why he is the strongest of the family."

"His relationship with his hive is unsurpassed."

"Wrong! It's because he is unsurpassed. He made his own body strong and the Kikaichu evolved to keep up with him. When I asked you about whether it was you or the hive in control you didn't have an answer. If the host is powerful, the hive naturally must grow stronger to protect it. Did you know Shibi spends three hours a day training both his body and chakra. He doesn't even use his hive until after that three hour period is up!"

Had he been anyone else, Shino did not doubt his mouth would be hanging on the ground. Something so simple could produce that much strength? For someone who depended on his bugs for everything, the idea of not using them in training sounded almost blasphemous. However, he did not believe his uncle had anything to gain by lying, and his father was strong.

"So this training is to develop my own body, thus forcing rapid growth in my hive."

"Only a teensy part of it." Shinji pinched his fingers together for effect. "Honestly, it would take years of training and subjecting you to different environments to develop your Kikaichu to Shibi's level. He accomplished the rare feat of having a single bug type handle almost any situation."

"Bug type?"

Shinji's grin grew impossibly wider and more mischievous.

"Did you know nephew-chan, that there are a total of seven different breeds of Kikaichu?"

"Seven?" Shino didn't attempt to hide the surprise from his voice. "I have heard of the rare nano sized Kikaichu but never of anything else."

"Rare? They're not rare. We just never use them because they're mean little bastards."

"Mean?"

"The nano breed would rather see you dead than help you. It takes overwhelming chakra and control to get them to originally submit. That's why we never infuse them with infants. Shikuro and his son were two of the few who underwent the process to integrate the little bastards."

"I was told that that breed is particularly powerful. You wish for me to undergo the process as well, or perhaps integrate with another breed?"

"Not at all, I want you to integrate with all of them."

Shino's eyes widened and he felt his hands start to tremble.

"That's not possible."

"Of course it is. Granted it's dangerous and difficult, but it's possible. You see, housing multiple colonies in the body is kind of dangerous. If the host doesn't have absolute control of every single little buggy in his body, then they start rioting and tear the host apart from the inside out."

"Is that how my father is so versatile with his Kikaichu?"

"Nope, your old man accomplished the almost impossible feat of taking on the commonly used type and breeding it to gain the attributes of the others. It took him twenty years."

"That… is impressive."

"You bet it is. I bet the jerk he couldn't do it either. Never thought that I would have had to pay up twenty years down the road."

Shino had a difficult time believing his father would engage in something as frivolous as gambling, but given the rather shattering nature of this conversation, he would not doubt it. He had no idea he was this unaware of the clan. His mind went over the information he had been given again. Given his uncle's abilities… he had a suspicion that the older man had already taken multiple breeds into his body.

"Uncle, how many kinds of Kikaichu are in your body?"

"All of them." The man pumped his fists high into the air. "You can refer to me as lord of the bugs!"

Shinji started laughing and dancing around as he used his wooden sandals to tap out a tune. Shino bit back a frown and forced his calm façade to come back to the surface. His father would never approve of his lack of composure. Even though something of this scale did give him a small amount of justification.

"Uncle… if you have that degree of power, why are you always locked away down here?"

Shinji stopped his jig in mid-tap. The man became slightly subdued as his ever present grin became more wistful.

"I'm what you could call a nest, nephew-chan. I have a small sample of each type in me for preservation purposes. If someone in the clan shows promise, I hand over a few of the requested type to take root and multiply in the new host. I'm like a bank for them. It makes me

too valuable to risk in a fight, and more importantly, it takes a great deal of focus to make sure they don't start multiplying. Otherwise… well that entire inner war scenario becomes a threat."

Shino nodded his head slowly to show he understood.

"Why will it be different for me then?"

"It won't. You're going to spend the rest of your life making sure the Kikaichu know whose boss, and keeping the peace. It will get easier after the first few days, but there will always be a risk if you do not keep them balanced and cooperative. Although if you are your father's son, it may be possible for you to gain unquestioning dominion from all of the Kikaichu. Time will tell I suppose."

"I have one more question. Why the two days of fighting? Was it to test me?"

The grin returned to its full power, and a frightened chill ran up Shino's spine.

"No, I knew you had the guts. You know how we infuse Kikaichu at birth right?"

"Yes, it is to limit interference from the new hosts system. We introduce it when the child is most susceptible, and its body most malleable."

Shino's eye widened for the second time that day. If inserting hives required little resistance, then the only way for an older child or adult to gain an additional hive would be…

"That's right nephew-chan." Shinji's grin became slightly malicious. "You've got to die six times before all of the Kikaichu breeds will be acclimated into your body."

"You sure about this Minato?" Jiraiya asked as the blond man double checked the security of his scrolls. "We could really use your help right now, and I'm not sure that bringing Kushina back would be best for Naruto."

"Kushina would be a great asset in the coming threats, and Naruto needs to get this behind him. Whatever the outcome may be."

"Kushina is just like him and won't drop it if he brushes her off. He doesn't need to be pushed anymore than he already is."

Minato secured a brown cloak around him and pulled the hood over his head.

"You've never doubted my decisions before Sensei. Why now?"

"Because all of you mean a great deal to me. I want all of you to be a family. However, you do not know Naruto. He won't accept you coming in and acting like an authority figure overnight."

"That's why I'm doing this. I know he has every right to be upset and hurt. I realize he could very well end up never wanting anything to do with us. But instead of dealing with us one at a time where he would have to face the same emotional strain twice, it would be better for him to only have to deal with it once."

Jiraiya crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared sternly at Minato's shadowed face.

"Just be careful and make sure you are doing this for his sake and not your own. He's had enough people let him down in his short life, and Konoha can't afford to lose him. And there are a growing number of loved ones that cannot afford to lose him."

Minato turned and started off down the dirt path leading east from the village.

"I promise I'll be back soon Sensei. If there is an emergency, you know what to do with the kunai. I'm going to make this right. I swear it."

Jiraiya watched as his first apprentice took off into the treetops in a blur. He turned to go back in when he paused. A large group was approaching from further down the path. His expression became more serious as the group came closer and began to take shape. They had an all too familiar trudge to their pace. They were refugees. When he saw the large cloud of sand carrying many of the sick and elderly, he realized just where the refugees were from.

The familiar red head of the current Kazekage stepped out from the rest of the large group. Gaara marched up to Jiraiya wearily as the sand cloud slowly sunk back into the earth.

"Please take me to the Hokage immediately. War is coming to Konoha."

Naruto sprinted as hard as he could to the Hokage's office as he seamlessly slipped in and out of Shunshin. She was gone. Someone took her from her room. How could someone just take her from her room? She was still injured and moving her would possibly kill her. Was it someone looking for revenge because of what happened in the Hyuga? No, they would have killed her on the spot.

He never got a chance to talk to her. What if he never did? She was gone.

He vaulted over the edge of the rooftop and rocketed straight for the nearest window leading to the Hokage's office. His feet hit the floor with a skid as the rest of the occupants stared in surprise.

"Naruto what-?" Tsunade started, but Naruto raced over to her so fast it caught her off guard.

"Baa-chan she's gone!" His eyes danced with panic as he gripped the edge of her desk. "Someone took her."

"Who Naruto? Who took who?"

"Hinata! Someone took Hinata!"

For the briefest of seconds, Tsunade paled an awful shade of white. It was enough to cause Naruto to pause his next verbal barrage. Why did she look like that? Baa-chan never looked like that. Yet, she didn't seem surprised either. Had she already known?

"Naruto," Jiraiya's voice came from behind him. "You should sit down."

Naruto turned ready to protest, but whatever he had died in his throat. Jiraiya was looking more serious than he had seen him in a long time. Gai was off in the corner with a grim expression. But what really threw him, was a haggard looking Gaara with a nearly defeated expression cemented onto his face.

"Wha- what's going on?"

"Danzo has made his move," Tsunade said softly. Her voice held a hint of reservation to it. Like speaking it would invite the devil into the room with them. "Sunagakure has been utterly destroyed along with almost half of its population."

"What?"

"He sent an army of cursed seal bearing ninja," Gaara said bringing everyone's attention to him. "It was… frightening to behold. By just witnessing it, I knew it was a losing battle. My assumptions were confused when I sent a powerful sand wave that should have buried the entire force in one swoop. They stopped it with little difficulty."

"So you ran?"

"Naruto!" Tsunade snapped.

"Yes, I did. If we had fought, we could have damaged that army, but the result would have ultimately been the same. However, we would have lost all of the civilians and ninja. At least now what is left of my forces can be joined with yours and improve our chances when that army inevitably comes here." Gaara's eyes hardened. "Or would it have been better that we stayed and fought to our dying breath? Tell me Uzumaki, what would you have preferred?"

"No you're right, I'm sorry." Naruto put his hands up defensively. "That was wrong how I said that. I just couldn't wrap my head around the idea of you losing without a fight. The idea that they were strong enough you didn't bother with a second attack was difficult to think about. I'm sorry Gaara."

Gaara sighed and rubbed the fatigue out of his face.

"No, I am sorry for being harsh. I did not fully explain the hopelessness of the situation."

"Kazekage-dono, how did you and the rest get out?" Jiraiya asked.

Gaara frowned and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Baki, he and a contingent of other ninja, including my brother Kankuro, held the front gate and then lured the army within Suna's walls. Where they… they set off a series of exploding tags on the surrounding cliffs. This buried Suna beneath the sands and a large portion of the army. He had used a seal to incapacitate me so that I would not confront the army and die. Temari stated that they all felt I should live to help ensure victory at a later time."

Naruto clenched his fists and looked over at Gai, whose expression did nothing to put him at ease.

"What happened to Lee?"

"He is missing along with Hinata. His weights were left behind. Lee never leaves his weights or any of his training equipment

unaccounted for."

"So then the same guys who took Hinata took Lee?" Naruto turned back to Tsunade. "Who did this? How did they do this?"

"Danzo's knowledge of how the village operated and its security is second to none bare the Hokage. Hell, he probably instilled a large number of protocols himself." Jiraiya said. "He's a sly old coot as well, and would most likely predict any changes we would have made after his departure. With his knowledge and direction, any halfway talented Anbu could slip in and out undetected."

"So the village is like an open door."

"To Danzo, yes it is. He made his life about the security of the village. It would be simple to circumvent our defenses. The invasion from Oto is proof of that."

"You mean-?"

"Most likely."

"I can't say for certain it is Danzo. However, I would feel comfortable assuming it is him." Tsunade said. "Jiraiya's spy network has picked up a lot of movement going on between the boarders of Fire and Rice country. We know that is where Danzo fled after his escape from Konoha."

"Why take Hinata and Lee though?"

Tsunade folded her hands in front of her face and leaned forward so her elbows rested on the desk. She cast an authoritive gaze on everyone in the room.

"What I tell you does not leave this room. Hinata had me artificially manipulate the Byakugan. To do so, I had to spend some time tweaking her ocular tissue, which effectively altered some of her genetic code."

"Huh?"

"Simply speaking, her new eyes would theoretically be passed down to any children she had. Given Danzo's love of blood lines, he will most likely use her to birth offspring that he could immediately place in Root."

Naruto's eyes started to shift into vertical slits as the marks on his face darkened. He had no respect for that man, but even so. Something like this seemed to much, even for a power hungry bastard. It was wrong on a level he couldn't even fathom. Whether it was the children or Hinata herself that was worse off, he couldn't figure out.

"I'm assuming he took Lee for the same reason," Tsunade said as she cast Naruto a warning glare, wordlessly telling him to keep himself in check. "The way that his natural drunken fist ability limits the consequences of the inner gates must be very appealing to him. The fact that he has access to Orochimaru's work as well just adds to the problems. It is conceivable that he could have an army of cursed seal wielding children with access to both the inner gates and an evolved Byakugan."

"Then let's go kick his ass!"

"Easy gaki," Jiraiya said. "Remember to think first before charging in. This situation is eerily similar to the one I gave that started your growth. Orochimaru had dozens if not hundreds of bases scattered around the country. What's worse, Danzo expects a rescue team."

Naruto clenched his eyes shut and took a deep shuttering breath. His teacher was right. He had to keep it together, and help with coming up with a solution instead of ranting like a child. They were letting him sit in on this meeting. He couldn't mess that up. His demonic features faded, and he cast his gaze over to Tsunade.

"How much time do we have, and what do you want me to do?"

"Danzo will not waste time and resources by recklessly birthing children with the odd hope that they carry the desired traits. He will first see if he can isolate their necessary attributes to either inject it into his existing army, or at least guarantee a successful transfer to the next generation. Even if he could do that within a week, Hinata is still injured. If we assume he has a skilled medic, we have at least two weeks. Jiraiya has every spy in the area focused on locating Danzo's base."

"What do we do once they have been located?"

Tsunade surprised everyone with a smirk.

"Naruto Uzumaki, you have demonstrated the ability to think with a somewhat level head in times of stress. In the cases that you have lost your cool, you are easily brought back to reason. You have proven repeatedly not only your talent in battle, but your determination to keep your comrades safe. You have also shown surprising wit and an acceptable amount of delicacy in terms of diplomatic matters." She reached under her desk and slapped a green flak jacket on the desk. "Effective immediately, you are promoted to chunin and tasked with gathering a rescue squad for an S-class mission. I want a list of candidates and a detailed battle plan by tomorrow at noon. Understood?"

Naruto stared at the jacket in shock as her words replayed themselves over and over again. He was a chunin. They were going to promote him despite his outbursts. He slowly reached down and pulled the jacket on. His shaky fingers grasped the zipper on the body and tugged it up as a feral grin spread on his lips.

"You got it Baa-chan!"

Shikamaru walked numbly around the back of his house. His help had been enlisted in bringing the Suna refugee's into the village. There were so many of them, a perpetual sea of dirty, hungry, and exhausted people. Some bore injuries, from scrapes to more serious

fare. Some cradled objects, the last reminders of their homes or loved ones, the last desperate strands of their now destroyed pasts. Many eyes were red, blank, or both. Yet, one chilling fact remained. Despite the large amount of people seeking asylum… there should have been so many more.

He cracked open the back door and wandered inside. When he had been first told that there was a large group outside the village walls, he had been put off at how troublesome it had been. But… the moment he had heard it was Suna, and the instant he saw the crushed people, any complaint had died on his lips. It had been an alarming, perhaps even an awakening experience. Shame had filled up in his chest. What right did he have to complain?

It had taken several hours and the sun was starting to set, but everyone was brought within the safe walls of Konoha. The haggard group had been given a temporary camp site in one of the training fields until a more permanent solution could be made. When he had been relieved, medical and food assistance was just being sent in. He'd seen Ino amongst them. Whatever Choji had said seemed to have worked. The bossy blonde seemed to have regained her old spark while still taking care of herself.

He trudged up the stairs and entered his room… the first door on the right. A small frown tugged at his lips as he spotted the person staring out the window lost in thought. The dusty blonde hair was barely held in place by four pigtails. Specks of dried blood dotted her fan and clothes. Without a word, he walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He felt her shoulders shake and damp droplets fall upon his hands.

This is how their relationship worked. She would show up if troubled, but refuse to show it. Her green eyes would stare out the window with a fierce glare, and he would hold her as her emotions trickled out. They wouldn't talk or try to let each other in. He would be there supposedly too bothered to do anything more than be in her company, and she would pretend to posses the unbreakable iron will everyone believed she possessed.

It wasn't so troublesome that way.

Blue eyes scrutinized the horizon as the rocky shores started to materialize in the horizon. Waves crashed angrily against the jagged cliffs, and he could hear the fierce winds howl further inland. The water churned violently as it swirled and sunk into foreboding vortexes. So many natural defenses, it was hard to believe such a country could ever fall… let alone become what it was.

"We can't afford to get any closer young man," a scruffy looking man said as he walked up behind him. "With the main bridge falling apart, the ship won't have a safe place to dock, and there isn't a boat in the world that can handle those types of waters."

Minato glanced over his shoulder while making sure to keep the majority of his face hidden. He gave a short nod and hopped up on the edge of the boat as he pulled out his signature kunai. With an expert toss, the kunai was launched high up into the sky. He watched as it flew higher until it was just at the peak of its ascent. Instantly, he warped into the air and found himself next to the aerial weapon. His hand snatched it and flung it forward at the nearest cliff.

The process repeated at a mind boggling pace. Minato would only appear for a moment before tossing the same kunai up or forward and disappearing again. In under a minute, the kunai struck the dusty barren ground of Uzu no Kuni, nearly a half mile from the ship. His eyes came into focus as the technique faded away. It always took a split second for his senses to shift from those provided by the technique to his real physical ones. And upon seeing the landscape, it wasn't the first time that he had preferred the colorless Hiraishin vision.

A wasteland… the word did not seem to give the environment justice.

There was no vegetation. Not a trace of the lush plant life the country had been known for remained. Kushina had described the large

island as a giant field of sweet green grass, large flowering trees, and numerous streams of clear water. She had boasted of a paradise housing a beautiful city crawling with people, and farmland so rich that at one time it had supplied a great deal of quality food to the elemental countries. It had been a paradise the way she had gone on about it… had been being the key term.

What he saw now made it difficult to believe. Any trace of life was long absent. In truth, the land looked more readily to claim it than promote it. The only movement was a massive screaming fog of wind and earth only several hundred feet in from where he stood. It was unbelievable to think that the aftereffects of the civil war still raged on in the form of a never ending storm.

For being so young when the country's troubles had started, Kushina had an amazingly detailed account of what had transpired. He always assumed it had been due to the rapid, devastating, and manic violent changes that had taken place. They no doubt left deep scars of mental trauma. It was truly saddening. Even this isolated country could not escape from the ripple that was the Second Great Shinobi World War.

Kushina couldn't have been more than six when that had occurred. At first, Uzu had been neutral to the war that had swept over the rest of the lands. It had continued as it always had by selling food to whoever desired to purchase it. This quickly became a problem for the elemental countries, and pressure from all sides began to intensify. In war, neutrality was as much of a threat as the enemy. Uzu itself had little to worry about as far as foreign powers. The grand bridge was the only means of entering the island, and their ninja force, while small, was second to none in terms of powerful individuals.

Had it remained merely an issue of foreign pressure, there would have been no issue. Unfortunately, it was the strain from within that brought everything crumbling down. The leadership in Uzu had closed all trade in order to give a strong warning they would not be bullied. The merchants, having grown rich during the war, felt it was

a conspiracy against them and began buying out the younger generation of ninja gradually replacing the old isolationist guard… a younger generation hungry for proving their strength and desiring to make a stamp on the world.

Perhaps the country's greatest strength as a natural fortress was also its greatest weakness. The problem with being on an island was that no one could walk away and cool off. Tension and anger could not dissipate and as the stress built, an underlying sense of something more dangerous took hold. So when the first person cracked, it spread like wildfire. Hysteria… pure, paranoid, insane, a state of mind forgoing all reason and empathy.

Kushina never was sure what had started the bloodshed. She had only known of how unbelievably quick her world had changed. In a literal day, the land she had loved was gone. Merchants with their young ninja armies slaughtering other rival merchants and their armies. Regardless of age or innocence, you hid or were slaughtered. She had told him that it was almost strange how everything escalated. There was no restraint, to the point that even the farmland that they fought over was destroyed. Had she not known better, she would have sworn everyone was under a massive psychotic inducing genjutsu.

For five years, she was hidden away and trained by the old guard. Like many smaller countries during the second war, a ninja progressed quickly or fell. The old guard had poured their teachings into her as the fighting grew to irreparable proportions. And then… Iwagakure arrived and did something no one thought they would. They used a forced extraction on the Four Tailed Monkey.

Kushina had no idea how Iwa was let into the country. All she knew was that the old guard barely had knowledge that the old Iwa Jinchuriki was among them. She knew that the Jinchuriki was in the last legs of her life. And she discovered, as the old guard forced her onto a fishing boat and away from the island, that forcefully triggering an extraction without the proper seals was destructive… nature altering destructive.

He remembered how her eyes had gained a far off stare when she had described it. A sense of horror had laced her words as if she was witnessing it anew. When the beast had emerged, so had all the compressed chakra housed within the Jinchuriki. Like any other form of pressure, when it builds and then is suddenly released it becomes more powerful than it would on its own. Given the fact that the Four-Tailed Monkey was a beast of fire and earth, it was the most effective means of ending Uzu. Kushina had said with a sad chuckle that she had felt the heat and heard the rumbles miles from the island itself.

He knew that at some point Iwa reclaimed the beast and re-sealed it in another host. However, the damage to Uzu was final. Iwa had been successful in ending the threat of other countries gaining the lands fertile soil, but in doing so eliminated an entire country in one fell swoop. Shortly after, Kushina had come to Konoha upon the request of her teachers. They had felt that of all the elemental nations, Konoha had the least amount of blood on their hands… and desired peace over battle. As for Uzu no Kuni itself, it had become inhospitable and fell into Konoha's custody after its victory in the third ninja war.

He pulled the hood down lower to protect his eyes from the storm ahead of him. What he was attempting was beyond insane even for him. The land was not only treacherous, but he had only a vague idea where the new outpost should be. There was a strong possibility he would end up going around in circles for days. However, not going was out of the question. He needed answers, and he would give everything to see his family together just once.

Danzo rested his chin on his hand enveloped cane. The attack on Sunagakure had gone far better than planned. Only half of his new army had been killed. He had to commend the young Kazekage on sound strategy. It took a wise mind to understand the benefit of retreat. Most young people would rather fight to the death for their pride or some such nonsense. No, the young man had seen the benefit in taking what forces he could and moving them to safety.

Predictably, the Suna remnants would head to Konoha and thus strengthen their forces.

It didn't matter. The Suna attack had been a test more than an actual assault. It had been surprising just how many ninja and prisoners Orochimaru had scattered about the Land of Rice. Had the snake been less driven for personal revenge and immortality, and more concerned with leadership, he could have posed quite the threat. Instead, he had kept to his ridiculous and selfish experiments. Spurning the vast resources he had at his disposal.

It didn't matter of course. He himself would be able to reap the benefit of the snake-nin's labors. While he had no use of immortality, the medical advancements were of great interest to him. With a healed body, a near unstoppable army, and a legion of highly trained and blindly loyal Root ninja, taking Konoha would be easy under that woman's weak rule.

He looked up as Forty-four strode into his room with her team dragging in the two targets. His eye cracked open when he took in the poor state of the Hyuga girl. For them to decide to move her in that condition they must have been in danger of being discovered. Forty-four would never have made a mistake like that. However, it wouldn't do to have the girl on the brink of death.

He had no doubt that Tsunade had already correctly anticipated the amount of time it would take for him to make use of the two prisoners. She would no doubt deploy a rescue team, given her weak heart. If she didn't, no doubt the troublesome ex-Jinchuriki would. He was hopelessly dedicated to anyone he made a connection with. It was not an assumption Uzumaki would come for them. It was a fact.

"I take it you ran out of time Forty-four?" Danzo asked.

"Yes sir, due to Jugo's failure to do any major damage to the village, Anbu had tightened their security in anticipation of intruders.

However, it was still fairly easy due to your instructions. Plus, no one suspects that I am under your command."

"Have you received more details about Jugo's defeat?"

"Yes my lord. This girl, while ending up injured, managed to slow down Jugo with several techniques that utilized the materialization of raw chakra. Reportedly, Naruto Uzumaki showed up and soundly destroyed Jugo shortly after using a strange blast. The villagers are praising his power."

Danzo closed his eye and meticulously thought over what had been recited. The past few days he had been in near constant contemplation about the boy. Had the Jinchuriki been rescued before extraction, or was there something more going on that he was unaware of? For him to defeat Jugo, he must indeed be strong… although strength alone would not help him in this war.

"Danzo-sama, there was another rumor that we heard. I could not verify its credibility, but judging the villagers' enthusiasm, I felt I should at least make you aware of it."

"Very well."

"They are saying that the Yondaime has returned and was alongside Uzumaki when he arrived to battle Jugo."

"Such a wild tale should be beneath your notice Forty-four."

"I thought so as well, but numerous people have claimed to have seen him. The Hokage's office has also been locked down to anyone aside from Kakashi Hatake and the two Sannin. It is most likely nothing, but I wished that you were at least aware in case the improbable occurred."

"Understandable, I commend you on your caution."

"Thank you my lord. What do you wish of the two prisoners?"

"Keep the boy sedated and in a cell. The girl shall be used to make sure that the information we received on Orochimaru's experiments is valid. Fu is collecting the required materials as we speak. If it is successful, she will be healed far faster than normal, and we will be able to accelerate my plans."

"Yes sir, may I join Torune and the army in tracking down the Suna survivors?"

"No, I have other uses for you."

"But Danzo-sama-."

Danzo's eye opened and he let out a burst of his oppressive chakra. He cast a firm gaze down upon the woman as other Root agents inched near her. They would strike her down with only hint of his order. She seemed to sense the danger and bowed her head submissively.

"I am well aware of your desire for revenge and blood. Suna robbed you of your life, justice was never brought down upon their heads. I promised you when you joined the opportunity to achieve your goals. You will be given the chance, but it will be when it will provide the greatest benefit. Am I clear?"

"Yes Danzo-sama. Please forgive my lack of respect."

"It is alright." Danzo's tone became softer and more like that of a wise teacher. "Yugao, Tsunade betrayed your trust when she left Hayate's death unpunished. Trust that I will give you the solace that you seek."

"I will Danzo-sama."

"You have been a loyal agent, and I shall reward you as such. You shall be given the privilege of cutting down Naruto Uzumaki when he undoubtedly comes for these two."

"Sir?"

"Tsunade views the boy as a substitute for her deceased brother. Because he made friends with Suna's Jinchuriki, she let that influence her decisions when given the right to exact amends. He is the start of your pain. Eliminate him, and the rest will begin to unfold for you"

He could almost see the anger roll off of her as his words sunk in. Of course, his hidden eye made sure to enhance her feelings. Those feelings of hers would serve him well in halting the rescue team. If by some stroke of luck she survived, he would have some of his other Root dispose of her. As loyal as she was, it was primarily due to Sharingan fed rage. Yet, she was beginning to become immune to his subliminal influence. He had little doubt that she would turn on him once her emotions became far more balanced. It was best if she was eliminated before that occurred.

Naruto frowned as he stared up at Shibi Aburame with an annoyed pout.

"What do you mean I can't see Shino?"

"I mean as I have said. Shino is not available at the moment. Are my words difficult to understand, Naruto Uzumaki?"

"I know what you meant. I want to know why."

"Wanting and necessity are two entirely different things, Naruto Uzumaki."

"Fine, I need to know why, because I am putting a team together and need his help."

"Would this team be responsible for the rescue of Hinata Uzumaki and Rock Lee?"

Naruto turned an unhealthy shade of red and started sputtering. He was so flustered he could barely think straight let alone talk. And for some reason, he got the distinct impression the bastard in front of him was smiling behind that high collared jacket of his.

"Hinata Uzumaki? Where the hell did you hear that?" Naruto's voice was about as loud as he could muster, but he wished it had sound more angry than embarrassed.

"It is rude to refer to someone without a last name. I have been made aware that she was no longer allowed the Hyuga surname, and has become rather close with you and currently resides at the Uzumaki residence. Is there another name she has taken that I have not been made aware of?"

"No but-."

"Then I shall refer to her as Hinata Uzumaki, until such a time that this name would be mistaken."

"Bu- but-."

"Please answer my previous question, Naruto Uzumaki."

Naruto sighed in both defeat and annoyance. He scratched the back of his head and looked up.

"Yeah it's for that. I need to know if he'd be willing to, and if he can move the moment I get the okay from Tsunade Baa-chan."

"He will be waiting for you at the village gate."

"What, but I haven't given him any detail or anything."

"Have faith in your friend, Naruto Uzumaki. Shino will be there at the front gate when you leave."

"Ne, nephew-chan, you hear that? Looks like your friends are in trouble," Shinji said as he pulled his ear away from the small hole connecting to the surface. "You think you'll be ready to help them in time… or are you already dead?"

Shino's mouth opened slightly as a faint gasp of air escaped from him. His damaged vocal cords made it difficult to speak. All of the screaming he had done had taken a toll on his throat. His father would be most displeased. Summoning all of his willpower he tried to talk again.

"Let us… continue uncle… please… introduce the next breed."

"You sure, nephew-chan?"

"We… lack time."

"Okay, number two of six coming up!"

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

There were some complaints about how quickly Danzo found out about Jugo's loss. It wasn't as immediate as it seemed. I didn't explain it well enough just for clarification. As far as Danzo's seeming advantage, he does have one. The guy has Plan's A through Z and subplans for each one. However, he can only partially expect what our heroes are coming up with.

So what are your thoughts on Shino's uncle, Shinji? He's an original character because I didn't know enough about the other Aburame, and didn't want to have them completely different from what they could be revealed as (like Shikuro). Instead, I borrowed his personality partially from Chinmei of Samurai Deeper Kyo fame.

What about Uzu's history?

Anyway, we go back to one update a week next Saturday. Would have had this one up earlier, but fanfiction wouldn't let me.

See you next week.

Voltage

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 17:

Shikamaru glanced down at the girl in his arms. She had finally drifted off to sleep, but a constant frown marred her features. He felt like sighing, but was afraid that it would wake her up, which would have been even more problematic. Knowing her, she probably hadn't slept since the attack. Instead, she would have made sure everyone else was taken care of. While admirable, it was a great deal of additional strain on top of the emotional turmoil.

He'd never seen her like this. Regardless of whether she was sad, angry, or happy, it always boiled down to some form of verbal sparring between them. That wasn't to say that her reaction to the past few days' events wasn't justified. It was entirely. It was just a shock to see her like this. To see her actually let go of the perfect kuonichi image was jarring. It made him… angry. Angry at how someone would cause anyone this much sadness.

He could count on one hand the amount of times he had been angry. While he was nearly constantly annoyed, true frustration was uncommon. Yet, seeing the people of Suna exiled from their home had set something off within him. It wasn't just because of Temari. He was far to lazy to be that chivalrous… she'd also no doubt beat him for defending her. It was something more like an instinctual line between right and wrong had been crossed. Good people, innocent people, had been removed from homes they'd known their entire lives. That didn't sit right with him. It was probably because it was so easy for him to relate to it.

His family's land included miles of forest filled with deer. He was raised around the deer. He'd run around and play with the fawns when he was little, and as he grew he cared for them. When one was sick or giving birth, he was up all night with his father helping in anyway he could. The Nara deer herd was almost more a part of their lives than ninja. If an army had taken Konoha, they would be gone. Generations of hard work and bonds would be completely ripped away. The thought of it made him want to hit something.

A frantic knock on his door jarred him from his thoughts. He was fairly sure who it was. Messenger-nin had been running about a few hours earlier. All ninja chunin and up had gotten the message, war was coming to Konoha, and Naruto would be leading a rescue team on the daunting task of entering Suna and rescuing Lee and Hinata. It was an Anbu level task that no Anbu would be available for. It rang eerily similar to the circumstances involving the rescue of Sasuke. He prayed the results would not be the same.

He untangled himself from her as gently as possible and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't wake up. Giving one last look to make sure she was in no danger of waking up, he turned and quickly headed down the stairs as the knocking grew louder. Naruto would start yelling for him by the third round of knocking so he increased his pace. His hand snatched out and grabbed the handle just as Naruto started making a sound. He pulled it open to see Naruto's mouth wide open.

"You are so impatient Naruto."

"You're slow."

Shikamaru sighed and motioned for Naruto to come in.

"Come on in. Just keep your voice down."

"Huh?"

"It's late and there are people sleeping so talk quietly."

"Oh okay."

The two went into the kitchen without another word. Shikamaru clicked a light on as Naruto collapsed into a chair. The lazy genius noticed the bags forming under the blonde's eyes, and the absolutely burnt out look housed on his face.

"What do you need my help for Naruto?"

"I'm guessing you already know about the rescue mission?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." Naruto reached in to his pocket and pulled out several loose pieces of paper. He set them out at the table as Shikamaru sat down. "I want you on the team, but I had wanted to get my plan straightened out first. It's not going well."

"Troublesome." Shikamaru started to leaf through the notes. "Naruto… you have doodles of you kicking Danzo in the ass. Is that as specific as your plans are going to get?"

"My mind wandered okay!"

"People sleeping."

"Sorry." Naruto rubbed his face. "Look, Baa-chan put me in charge of this plan so I don't want to push it off on you. But, I'm not very good…"

"At what, planning strategy?"

"No, I have a lot of good ideas, and Ero-sensei taught me really well in defining objectives. I just can't seem to get the balance right."

"Balance?"

"Yeah, you know numbers, power, and ability that kind of stuff."

"You mean you can't figure out your team."

"Kind of. It's more a matter of numbers of the team. We're going to be going into Danzo's domain. To fight evenly, we'd need a team of equal size or power, but that's going to waste a lot of time and energy. We could sneak by with a small team, but if we get caught, we won't have enough people to fight back. Not to mention, I'm hesitant of taking too many ninja's with us since Danzo's army is knocking on Konoha's door."

Shikamaru blinked and glanced through the notes again.

"I'm surprised. This is actually really thought out, or at least you have posed some intelligent questions… very surprising."

"I'm not stupid you know."

"Sleeping Naruto."

"Sorry."

"Who have you got for the team so far?"

"Shino's dad said Shino would be at the gate. You and me."

"That's it?"

"None of the new genin are capable of this type of mission. All jonin and Anbu are needed here. That leaves the chunin. Our group has been whittled down to less than half of what it was. Neji and Tenten aren't on active duty anymore. Lee and Hinata are captured. Ino will be needed here as a medic if Konoha comes under attack, and the other two… you know."

"That still leaves Kiba, Choji, and that Sai guy."

"Danzo would expect us to bring Sai in an attempt to predict his moves. Choji is a great powerhouse, but we wouldn't be able to slip

through unnoticed. The same could be said for Kiba, since Akamaru would be coming as well."

"So you are leaning on sneaking in?"

"See that's the problem. It's smarter to sneak around the army, but wouldn't it seem likely that Danzo would have his Root guys as his personal guard?"

"I think you're underestimating the army. It took out Suna effortlessly."

"Gaara wasn't prepared, and from what he told me. They prepared the front line specifically to neutralize him. Plus, he was knocked out before he had a chance to really start fighting. Besides that, Ero-sensei always said that while an army gains force, they lose mobility… which, I think means that they bump into each other a lot more right?"

"So you are unconcerned with the army, but Root is another matter all together correct?"

"Right."

"I'm coming along as well."

The boys turned to see Temari coming down the stairs. Naruto's eyes went wide and he started looking back and forth between the two. Slowly, a mischievous grin formed and he leaned in toward Shikamaru.

"Gaara's going to kill you."

"Not if you keep you mouth shut," Temari said as she gave him a glare that caused him to shrink back. "Besides, our clothes remained on for your information."

Naruto went to make a comment, but noticed the shadow starting to move near his feet.

"You won't be too troublesome about this right Naruto?" Shikamaru asked. The blonde nodded enthusiastically as Shikamaru glanced over to Temari. "Won't you be needed here? Your brother is going to depend on you a great deal, not to mention after Kankuro…"

"I am probably better at stealth than blondie over there and can dish out more damaging attacks than you."

Shikamaru looked back over at Naruto.

"You know she's right. We should just let her handle the mission by herself."

Temari sighed and gave him a small peck on the forehead before heading out the door.

"Let me know when you we're leaving."

The two remaining ninjas blinked and glanced over at each other.

"So how long have you two…"

"Not now Naruto.

"Okay."

"Alright." Shikamaru pulled a pen out of his pocket. "Let's organize your ideas and get this into the proper format. We'll iron out the detail as we go along."

Danzo used his critical eye to give Orochimaru's records one last examination. Everything looked to be in order, and there did not appear to be any degenerative side effects as long as one stayed away from the body hopping technique the missing-nin had become known for. It was a truly despicable practice and had caused the deceased man to become self-absorbed to the point that he

squandered valuable resources. The pursuit of immortality was both futile and self-destructive.

Danzo knew a man became immortal through his philosophies and actions. Once this was achieved, he would rule Konoha until his dying breath, at which time a hand picked successor would continue his rule. He would forever live on through each generation because of his teachings. It mattered little if he was there or not.

He set the papers down and turned to the broken girl strapped onto the lab table. With practiced efficiency, he inked the mind control seal upon her forehead. It would not do to give her the gifts he was planning to, and then have her turn against him. No, she would be loyal to him, and be instrumental in the Nine Tails downfall. With a final swipe of the brush, he completed the seal and set the tool down. He gave a short nod and the agents acting as his assistants set to work.

They carried vials of strange liquids and dozens of paper seals. Their movements were in perfect synch as they prepared the rejuvenation experiment. It was an intricate waltz around the operating table. In minutes, they were done. Danzo watched as several made the specified hand signs and began to build up chakra. The seals began to glow, and a pair of lavender eyes snapped open.

"Tsunade-sama, here are the results from Yondaime-sama's and Naruto-kun's tests," Shizune said as she set the files on the Hokage's desk. "As requested, I brought them straight here."

"Thank you Shizune. See if Shikaku needs anything, and then you may take the rest of the night off."

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama."

Her assistant left and Tsunade leaned back in her chair. Her hazel eyes roamed over the pages with an unparalleled scrutiny. Every scrap of information was dissected and stored in her mind. There

had been too many tests for her to reach a conclusion during her examinations, and given the bizarre, unpredictable, and complicate nature of their seals, it would be foolish not to have made a snap decision.

She put Minato's file down with a small smile. The man was completely healthy, and there appeared to be no adverse side effects to his resurrection. She grabbed Naruto's file and began the process again. What he was bound to come up with in his report tomorrow was sure to surprise her. Whether it was going to be good or not remained to be seen.

His promotion had been unorthodox, in lieu of not taking an exam. But, she had the blessing of both Kakashi and Jiraiya, and multiple reports detailing his critical successes. The only argument against his promotion could have been his emotional control. However, his actions upon his return had proven that he could be both emotional and focused. As long as he was willing to listen to reason, she was more than willing to promote him. Besides, she was already preparing him to take over her role so chunin was merely a formality.

He was unaware of it, but she did not give everyone the opportunity to charge into closed meetings and argue with those in high authority. The information he had been allowed to be let in on was not for a normal chunin. It would take many years, but steadily, he would be shaped into a Hokage. Without him knowing, he would receive more and more responsibilities. With a considerable amount of grooming, he would become an excellent Hokage.

Her eyes locked on a particular piece of information, and she was jolted from her thoughts. She re-read it again just to be sure and set the paper down. Her eyes glazed over as she stared at nothing.

"Damn."

Naruto stepped out of the tree line and made his way over to the large bonfire at the outskirts of the training field. The camp was silent

as the exhausted people had most likely fallen into fitful sleep. He frowned as he saw Gaara staring blankly into the fire. The Kazekage's shoulders were slumped, and his entire demeanor radiated a hidden agony. Quietly, Naruto sat down beside him and also looked into the fire. Not a word was spoken for what seemed like hours. He hated the silence, but it wasn't like he knew what to say to his friend. Gaara had struggled to win over his people and change the village for the better. It wasn't fair that this had to happen to him.

"I failed them didn't I," Gaara said slowly without removing his gaze from the flames. "I became Kazekage in order to protect them and gain their appreciation. In the end, it didn't matter."

"Gaara, I-."

"I couldn't even slow the forces. Instead, Baki, Kankuro, and many others sacrificed themselves to save me. I've been thinking of the different actions I could have taken. It seems like I must have made a mistake to accept defeat so easily. However, it keeps coming back to letting Suna fall so that Danzo wouldn't win in the future. While I will not regret it… I can not help but feel that I let my people down.

"It's not over yet."

Gaara glanced over at him.

"Pure determination will not be enough this time, Naruto."

Naruto stood up and dragged his friend up with him. He pointed out across the camp.

"Determination is always enough. You are still the Kazekage."

"But-."

"Would they have followed you here if they didn't think you were their leader?"

Gaara's complaints died on his lips as his eyes grew wide. Well, as wide as Gaara's emotionless persona allowed. The red head looked around slowly. His eyes rested on each tent, every slumbering silhouette within. Understanding slowly built within the teal orbs, and a subtle smile tugged faintly at the edge of his lips.

"Once again, you have stated what should have been obvious to me." Naruto let him go as the Suna-nin looked out across the camp one more time. "I apologize for my momentary lapse into self-pity."

Gaara slowly sat back down as Naruto smiled.

"No problem Gaara, you'd do the same thing for me."

"That I would." Gaara looked back down at the fire. "I understand Temari will be joining you in your mission."

Naruto grinned nervously.

"Well, I actually wanted to make sure it was okay with you. This mission… well yeah."

"She has made her choice, and I am not so overprotective that I would order her not to go. It's not like her mind wouldn't have been focused on the Nara anyways."

"What?" Naruto's voice came out in a painful squeak, and he failed at looking innocent. "Wh- why would y- you think that?"

"I am not oblivious to my family's actions. The Nara is actually someone I approve of."

"… Really?"

"Yes. He seems to be a good match for Temari. And, if there should be an issue, he is easy to kill."

"Um Gaara… that's not how you-."

"I should go retire for the night. You should do the same."

"Gaara…"

"Goodnight Naruto. I shall see you tomorrow at the Hokage's office."

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow as he received another knock on the door. Naruto only left an hour ago, and they had developed a rather solid plan. Temari wouldn't be back tonight. His parents wouldn't knock. Besides, his father was helping with a defense plan, and his mother was helping stockpile food incase of a long siege. Well, help was the wrong word. That troublesome woman was most likely barking orders and making the lives of whomever volunteered miserable.

"Asuma-sensei?"

"Yo, Shikamaru." The bearded jonin jabbed his thumb behind him. "Hadn't seen you in a while, so thought I'd stop by. Let's go take a walk."

"At one in the morning?"

The older man grinned through his cigarette and shoved both hands in his pockets.

"Come on, you've got your own team now so you shouldn't be so lazy."

"It's not my team. We're the Hokage's team."

"Yeah, and she probably put you in command. Now let's go."

Shikamaru grumbled and stepped outside into the cool night.

"So you going to tell me what prompted this visit."

"Training."

"What?"

Asuma stopped and looked over his shoulder. The red ember of his smoke reflected off of his eyes, and Shikamaru bit back a sigh. His teacher had gotten that same look the month he was training for the chunin finals. He always got that look when he wanted to teach for real. The chunin really just wanted to crash and put today behind him. But if his teacher had that look… today was going to be a lot longer than he had wanted it to be.

"I guessed Naruto would be asking you to be a part of the rescue team, since the captured are your members. If you guys are going to be heading into the lion's den, you need to be ready. Since you're my apprentice, it's my responsibility to do make sure that happens."

"Couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"You guys leave as soon as word comes, which could be any time. Besides, you can't be a lazy kid anymore Shikamaru."

The shadow user thought back to earlier that day. He remembered what he had seen and felt, how Temari had acted, and the plans Naruto constructed with his help. They had been his attempt at bettering himself, but was that enough? He was mentally exhausted and wanted to just laze about. Was the act of improving dependent upon his actions, or doing something when he didn't want to? He frowned and looked up at his teacher.

"I can't say I won't complain, but I don't want to let people down. Let's go."

"Good to hear. I knew I picked the right student to be my kid's sensei."

"You don't have a kid."

"You won't be able to say that in six months."

"Troublesome."

"No."

"But-."

"No."

"But Hime-."

"No, you damn pervert."

Jiraiya pouted and turned his head to the side in a Naruto like fashion. It was a habit he had picked up from the brat. However, the impact was significantly less substantial. He wasn't that bothered that she wouldn't entertain his request, but he had hoped she had at least thought it over.

"He's going to be facing Danzo and a lot more than that. The gaki could use my help."

"We can't afford to have any spare ninja from the village. The fact that I'm even allowing him to go with a team is stretching it."

"We don't even know if that army is coming. My sources have said that their just milling around the boarder between Wind and Fire. If they do attack, it would take over eighteen hours at top speed. That would be plenty of time for me to travel back through the toads."

"Do you really think Danzo would leave his army sitting out there by accident?"

"No."

"He's plotting something Jiraiya. I know he's already expecting a rescue team, and he probably assumes Naruto will be a part of it. The man is as smart as a Nara, and more secretive than all five Kage's combined. Whatever we've planned will not be enough."

"Then perhaps it would be wise for you to let us step in Tsunade."

The two Sannin turned toward the door and Tsunade's face twisted into a scowl. Koharu and Homura stood there as calm as ever, as if their dismissal was merely a slap on the wrist. Their councilor robes were thankfully absent. Instead, they wore simple civilian clothes. Although, the articles were dangerously similar to their attire from before.

"You have a lot of guts coming here, Koharu, Homura."

"We have heard through the grapevine about what is occurring. We would like to offer our assistance," Homura said as he stepped forward.

"I warned you that would be considered treason."

"We know. But, I request that you here us out."

"I think I've heard from you to more than enough in the past."

"Tsunade, your distaste for us is well noted," Koharu said. "Yet, I believe we can be of benefit to you. As much as you hate my scolding, do try to act as a Hokage rather than a child."

Jiraiya bit back a chuckle as he saw the familiar vein appear on Tsunade's forehead. They were a shrewd pair. He'd give them that. The Hokage's eyes cut over to him briefly. It was an unspoken question on whether she should do as asked. He gave her a short nod. They risked being executed for something like this so obviously whatever they wanted to talk about was important to them. The question was what they had to gain from it. He knew that they weren't power hungry by nature. Rather, they just believed in protecting Konoha from all threats. A little to close to Danzo's style for his tastes, but they were at least upfront about it.

"Fine, what do you want?"

"As councilors of Konoha, we were given a compound in which to live. It is of similar size to the Hyuga compound and only houses us and the modest staff. The compound was primarily founded so that any important figures visiting Konoha would have a private place to relax."

"Go on."

"We would like to open its doors for the Suna refugees. There is no reason for them to camp out in a field when they can fit in the compound with a little reorganizing."

Tsunade looked surprised for a moment, before she shook her head.

"Not what I was expecting, but I have to ask what you gain from this."

"We should finish what we came to offer first," Homura said. "We would like to assist in the fight against Danzo."

"I'm not putting you anywhere near commanding my ninjas."

"You misunderstand. We wish to fight Danzo literally. We request to be part of the rescue team Naruto Uzumaki is forming."

Jiraiya and Tsunade both momentarily looked like the elders had grown additional heads. The latter quickly shook it off and leveled a serious glare at them.

"I know you two think poorly of me, but give me a little credit for my intelligence."

"We love this village Tsunade," Koharu said. "Yes, in recent years, we chose to side with Danzo, but remember that we did agree and support you on your arrangements with Suna. It is really only in the matter of Uzumaki that we have disagreed. But that is unimportant now, what is important is that the village we love is at risk."

"Why should I trust you? What could you possibly say to convince me that this isn't an excuse for you to run to Danzo?"

"We can say nothing, but show this." Homura pulled up his sleeve and showed Jiraiya a tattoo on his forearm. Koharu quickly did the same. "I trust that this puts your fears at rest. If you would read the seal to her Jiraiya."

The toad sage leaned down and scrunched up his face as he studied their arms. As the seconds ticked by, his face grew paler. He quickly looked up at them with a mixture of disbelief and pity. How desperate were they?

"What is it Jiraiya?" Tsunade asked.

"It's a forbidden seal. They branded themselves with execution seals."

"What?"

"We assumed it would be difficult for you to believe us," Homura said as he rolled down his sleeve. "These seals will kill us on the spot if it senses we have even an idea of treason against you or a ninja of Konoha."

"Are they real Jiraiya?"

"Yeah."

"Can they be removed?"

"No, it's been grafted to their very soul."

"Danzo is our mistake," Koharu said. "While we still stand by our choices, it does not change the fact that many of them enabled Danzo to gain more authority. It also goes without saying that he is a dangerous man and mentally Sarutobi's equal. The younger generation will not be able to keep up with his strategies."

"Why?" Tsunade stood up and looked at them with a mild desperation. "Why are you doing this?"

"Konoha is our home. We have devoted our lives to its safety and improvement. If there is anyway we can continue to do so, we will."

"They've got you Hime." Jiraiya grinned. "They can't betray you that's for sure."

Tsunade sighed.

"Very well. You are tasked with assisting Naruto Uzumaki in the rescue of Rock Lee and Hinata. However, I also require for you two to watch the younger generation. See the value in them, and why both I and the Sandaime decided to put our faith in them."

"Yes." Koharu and Homura gave a low bow. "Thank you… Hokage-sama."

A wide and flat shadow stood out against the backdrop of the night sky. Presumably night would be the more correct term. The density of the flying particles within the storm made it appear darker than the actual time. It didn't help that his blue eyes were bloodshot from the constant bombardment of dust and sediment. He wouldn't complain though. The ache in his legs and rawness of his throat were small annoyances. To accomplish what he sought to, a few discomforts like this were barely worthy of thought.

His eyes focused on the shadow that he seemed to be inching towards. That was it, no mistake. He'd consider smiling, but figured the sheer amount of stuff that would get caught in his mouth would be impossible to remove. Instead, he picked up his pace. How he was going to get in without a full interrogation was going to be difficult. Though, it wouldn't be half as difficult as explaining everything to Kushina. She hadn't been particularly agreeable in his decision to use the Shinigami… and Naruto.

His foot crunched down into the dust, and the faint sound of something hissing just barely reached his ears above the wind. He reacted almost purely on instinct as the hair stood on the back of his neck. The long hours of training and battle had honed a sixth sense that most experience ninja had. It allowed them to perceive what was happening and predict what was to come almost as if they were psychic. It was a blessed ability, and it served ninja well. No more so than this point.

He leapt up as the ground exploded around him. The hood of his cloak brushed something, and he twisted in the air just in time to see the fire from below glimmer off something metallic next to his head. His senses stretched out and a frown found its way to his face. Razor wire was threaded all around him in a perfect web. The design was tight enough to ensure capture, but wide enough that the victim would be able to move… and sever themselves.

He dropped one of his kunai and warped to it before he was tangled within the trap. His feet crunched in the barren earth and started to sink. He grabbed the kunai from the dirt and flung it forward. With a flash of light, he was pulled from the quickly deepening quagmire and onto more stable land. No sooner had he landed then the sound of something whistling reached his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a literal wall of kunai and shuriken flying towards him.

He bit his thumb as he grabbed a scroll and unraveled it. His bloody thumb scribbled out a seal formula in under a second. With a pulse of chakra, the scroll seemed to take a life of its own and wrapped around him in a dome. As soon as the lap gap closed, the barrage hit. Like rain hitting a tin roof, the projectiles pelted the hardened scroll shield. The second the sound stopped, he ceased pumping chakra into the scroll and rolled it back up. Five sharp blades pointed around him in a circle as masked ninja stared down at him coldly.

"Hello," he said with an embarrassed grin. "Is Kushina in?"

"Not a chance in hell."

"It wasn't a request."

"Don't care."

"You aren't in any-."

"Still not happening."

"Naruto Uzumaki, I am ordering you to take along these extra members for your team."

"And I'm saying no way! Is your hearing going on you Baa-chan?"

Tsunade's eye twitched warningly, but Naruto continued to glare at her defiantly. He was confident he was out of her arm's reach… mostly. He glanced back at the three standing along the wall. The two bastards from the council were far from his favorite people, and the old woman beside Gaara looked like she would keel over after a good short walk. What were they thinking of switching her with Temari?

"I'm trying to form a rescue team for an extremely dangerous mission," Naruto said as he turned back to his leader. "Not escort a couple of geezers to an old folk's home. I mean come on. They'd probably break their hips by the time we got to the village gates."

"Would you please be a little more respectful, Uzumaki," Koharu said.

"Bite me, you backstabbing hag. Even if you were up to this, I'd be more worried about you and mister wrinkly dick selling us out to that other old bastard, than focusing on the mission."

"Must you be so vulgar, Uzumaki?" Homura asked. "You can make your displeasure apparent with out sounding like a child from a brothel."

"Oh, I am going to kick your-."

"That's enough Naruto," Tsunade said firmly. "Measures have already been taken to prevent them turning on you."

"Doesn't change the fact that I don't want to be anywhere them," he mumbled quietly.

"Is there a particular reason for your sudden hostility Uzumaki?" Homura asked. "While you have never enjoyed our company, you have also never been so vehement in your anger."

"Vehe- what?"

"Intense, Naruto."

He bit back his initial gut reaction to let them know exactly why he despised them. Why being in the same room as them made him sick. They had been part of the group that separated his mother from him. Granted, he couldn't really blame them for looking out for Konoha. In the end, the only one to blame was Kushina for accepting the mission without any form of resistance. However, there entire mentality rubbed him the wrong way. They didn't give a damn about the people of the village as long as the stone walls stood. In his view, just because they didn't plan an overthrow like Danzo didn't make them any different. Regardless, Jiraiya had literally pounded it into his head that information was valuable. Ranting, especially when it wouldn't change anything, only served to give the enemy a greater advantage over you.

"I was planning on going to fight Danzo, not have two of him for company." He didn't miss the impossibly slight slump of their shoulders. Ignoring it, he focused back on Tsunade. "My personal issues aren't the problem anyways. Shikamaru and I already came up with a plan. We will be leaving in under a day. Extra people would ruin it."

"I've already looked over your plan. While the member's roles are clearly dictated, it would be a simple matter to add on three more."

"That still-."

"Take them along or the mission is cancelled."

Naruto's eyes narrowed. That was a low blow. He knew he was being difficult, but there was no reason to threaten him with something like that. Shino, Shikamaru, Temari, and he had a good team dynamic… something that was even more important than the plans. Having them along would ruin it. The two traitors would spend the entire mission trying to either tell him how to lead or do their own thing entirely. The other old lady obviously had bad blood with the Hokage. When she wasn't snoring softly, she was shooting bitter looks at his blonde leader. No, he couldn't let this drop.

"You wouldn't leave Hinata and Lee as prisoners."

"Don't push me. I made you a chunin because you were supposedly ready to handle it. Do not make me regret my decision. Put your personal feelings aside, and use the resources you have available to you. Those are your choices, period."

Naruto's bristly demeanor deflated as he looked like he had been struck. His eyes clouded over and he hung his head down. So… it was going to be like that then? She was going to risk the entire mission just so the traitors could be on the team. Had they gotten some sort of blackmail on her? Or… was it that she didn't trust him?

"Fine… is there anything else you want?"

"Not for now."

Naruto turned around to head out. He paused to level a warning look at the two ex-elders.

"We'll be leaving tomorrow morning. Jiraiya will send me the exact location by toad while we're traveling."

He walked out and shut the door with more force than was necessary.

"Is it wise to have that child in charge, Hokage-sama?" Koharu asked.

"The brats a hothead. He has moments of immaturity like this, but when it really matters, he will not fail."

"I hope you are right."

"I am. Naruto will cool off and finally prove to you that he is more than capable of leading your group."

Being tied to a chair with a chakra suppressant seal on your chest was not a great experience. You couldn't move. Food and bathroom breaks were at the mercy of the guards, if there was any at all. If you had a scratch, you couldn't get to it. But the worst aspect was that you couldn't roll with the punches the interrogators dished out. The head could only turn so far, and the harder and more accurate the hit, the more necessary it was to move. These guys were very accurate, and hit very hard.

"You know, we have kill on sight orders for anything that moves out in that dead land. You're a lucky man. We're curious as to why you chose to look like our dead Yondaime instead of any number of regular infiltration tactics."

"Where's Kushina?"

"Answer my question, and maybe I'll answer yours."

"Kushina will answer your question. She can validate my identity."

"Oh. And why is that?"

"Because she's the mother of my child."

Minato could practically feel the man blinking in surprise from behind his mask. Not that he blamed him. Kushina was beautiful, but not exactly approachable from a romantic perspective. She had been known as much for her refusal at dating as she was for her skills. The fact that their relationship had been kept low key did little to help matters.

"So do you just dress as the Yondaime for fun? You really don't seem to have a grasp of who he was, unless you just like making up stories of heroes."

"Would you prefer to hand me my kunai? I am sure you know of my prized technique."

"Do you think I'm that-?"

"It's fine. Let him show us," the woman in the right hand corner said. "Put the kunai on the other side of the room."

The one he had been speaking to grumbled, but quickly undid the ropes and grabbed one of the tri-pronged kunai. He flung it to the far corner, and crossed his arms. His posture radiated a challenging aura, and Minato had to resist the urge to quirk and eyebrow. This Anbu fellow seemed pretty annoyed with him, or maybe just eager to throw his authority around. However, he backed down pretty quickly to the other one's command. It left him with little doubt as to who it was.

"Well come on, Yondaime wannabe."

There was a yellow flash, followed by the sound of something flying through the air, and finally Minato was standing in front of the Anbu that had mocked him.

"Are you convinced Anbu-san?"

"Yo- Yondaime-sama?"

"Leave us," the woman in the corner said as she moved forward.

"Y- Yes ma'am."

The Anbu quickly left the room and shut the door. The woman stood far enough away that she could react to anything he might throw, but close enough she could cut him down if need be.

"So you going to remove the mask, or do we talk face to face? It'd be nice if it was the latter."

The woman sighed and pulled back the hood that hid her light burgundy hair from view. She let it fall freely and pulled off the mask. He felt his heart beat just a little faster as she looked straight at him. Those grayish blue eyes of hers hadn't dimmed a bit… although they were colder than he remembered. Aside from only minute differences, she didn't really look any older than she had the last time he saw her. Perhaps, her expressions were a bit more weathered, a bit more weary of the world.

"What are you doing here, Minato?"

This time he did quirk an eyebrow.

"You're not surprised to see me?"

"With your level of determination and genius, I'm more surprised it took you this long."

"Then why are you asking me why I am here? Isn't it normal to go after the one you love and let them know that you are okay?"

"You don't do anything without a purpose. Maybe I should ask a different question. How long have you been back?"

He felt a pang of guilt at how she had breezed over the topic. Her being angry with him had been expected. How much so he was still trying to figure out. It didn't matter though. He would accept whatever she chose to give him, whether it was anger or happiness. Second

chances were rare in their world, and when they did come only the truly stupid would not try to make the most of it.

"A few days, I started off for here as soon as I got the okay from Tsunade-san."

"Are things going well? I have not heard from her for almost a year."

"No, it's one of the reasons I came to get you."

"I'm needed here."

"Not as much as back home."

He saw her lips dip ever so slightly into a frown at the mention of the word home. That wasn't a good sign. Kushina was stubborn and often had a fiery temper. It had lessened as she had gotten older, but some things still set her off. If what he had been told was true, she had probably tried to bury herself deep behind that mask she wore. He didn't doubt that it wouldn't take much to break her out of it. She was Naruto's mother after all, and if she would ever forgive him, it would be sooner than later. He felt a little nervous at the thought of mother and son. The two of them in the same room would be excitable that was for sure.

"The other reason?"

"Naruto."

Her face fell at the mention of their son's name, as if her barely hidden anguish melted the icy demeanor she had put up. Her eyes drifted to the ground as her arms came up to hug herself.

"Is- is he… okay?"

"Yes. Sensei has said that he's had some troubles recently, but he takes it in stride and keeps going ahead. Although, he hasn't been very receptive of me."

"Does he know?" Kushina's face became more alarmed. "Did they tell him about you, about… me?"

"Yes, only several hours before he met me. He's taking it well for the most part."

"Damn that old hag! I told her not to tell him about me."

"He deserved to know."

"It would have been better for him to think that he was alone because I died. Not because I abandoned him."

"Better for him, or better for you?"

Her face twisted up into a scowl, and she stomped forward.

"You self-righteous bastard! How dare you make me sound like a coward."

"That's not-."

"Just shut up! You weren't the one who lost their loved one. You weren't the one who had to hold our baby for only a month and then drop him off at an orphanage. You didn't have to watch him grow up through a short letter and a crappy picture every few years! Do you know it's been almost four years since that happened? That the only thing I know is that he was a training trip with Jiraiya?"

"Kushina, I-."

"I'm sure being in the Death God's belly was hard for you Minato, but don't trivialize my life."

"I wasn't trying to do that." He looked at her as sincerely as he could as his own emotions threatened to get a hold of him. "Kushina, I can never say sorry enough times for the pain I've caused the two of you. I do not regret my actions, and will not apologize for them. It needed to be done for the safety of the village, and many people have been

saved… and many more will be. However, I had never expected you and Naruto would be separated, and be forced into your lives. I was foolish and irresponsible not to do more for you two before I sealed the fox. I'm trying to make up for that. That's why I'm here, and that's why we need to go back for Naruto's sake."

"But… doesn't he hate me?"

"He's hurt and angry. However, Sensei has explained to me a little about who he is. He has the unbelievable ability to make enemies into friends, and cherishes anyone who reaches out to him. I don't think it will be easy for all of us to talk… but, I don't think it is hopeless."

"I don't know if I would forgive us if I was him."

"Do you forgive me?"

He took a slow step forward, and wouldn't argue that he was feeling a little vulnerable at the moment. Things had been happening so fast, trying to catch up with sixteen years of absence, and not immediately jump into the fray of Konoha's newest problems was difficult. However, his family was his first priority this time around. Besides, it wasn't like Naruto and the others were helpless. From what Jiraiya had said, Naruto's age group was abnormally skilled. His teacher had also been fairly serious when he said that Naruto was closing the gap between them daily.

"You want to give me more than five minutes of knowing your alive before you ask that?"

"I'm sorry. I've been pretty selfish haven't I?"

"I don't think you have a selfish bone in your body." Kushina huffed as she looked to the side. "You've just always known what you wanted and went for it. It's the only reason I ever bothered to get involved with you."

"Jeez." He gave a forced grin. "Am I really that bad?"

"Sometimes." She sighed and relaxed slightly. "I'm not going to forgive you, because there isn't really anything to forgive. I ultimately agreed to you sealing the fox in our baby, even if I hated it originally. I didn't even regret it when the villagers would pretend Naruto wasn't worth notice, that our beautiful boy was some type of blight. I understood that it was all for the best. So, it wouldn't be fair to blame you."

"Thank you, Kushina. That's all I ask of you."

"Oh don't think you're getting off that easy." A cruel smirk crept across her face. "You're going to tell me everything that's been happening. And when we return to Konoha, you're going to buy me all the ramen I want."

He scratched the back of his head with a nervous smile and his eyes closed.

"It may have been easier just not to have forgiven me."

He felt her head rest on his chest as she wrapped her arms around him. His own arms enveloped her out of simple habit, and for a moment their problems dissipated. It was only the two of them content in being reunited.

Author's Note:

Please Read and Review.

Yeah, going to nip this in the bud. If you have read the most current manga chapter, you know that my Danzo is significantly different. I can't say I was really happy with it after so many chapters of making him this die hard ninja. On another note, Sakura is more emotionally driven in the manga than even in my own story.

Okay, let's see… I had a few gripes about the previous chapter. All of them really boiled down to not expanding on certain points enough. I tried to do a little better with that this time around.

Anyway, hope you enjoy. This story has taken twists that most were not expecting, and we've lost some readers because of it, but hopefully for the majority you will stick with me through the end and enjoy the ride.

Now, back to Mass Effect 2.

Crackle

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 18:

Naruto made his way to the main gate much more slowly than he thought he would for his first mission in a leading role. At this point, there was little doubt that the frown that had plastered itself on his face was permanent. To say that yesterday put a bad taste in his mouth was an understatement. It was a waste of time to sulk about it, but damn, if he hadn't felt the ice cold grip of failure run up his spine when it became final.

He knew he had appeared childish and arrogant. However, adding those two had been the worst thing that could have happened. It wasn't having new members that irked him. That was more than welcome. It was that he had Danzo's two biggest ass kissers to maneuver around. The entire operation felt compromised, and they hadn't even left the blasted village yet.

His eyes glanced up to the gate. The geriatric squad was already there. The one from Suna and the two from Konoha made no attempt at conversation. Rather, it was a mutual feeling of disinterest that hovered above them. The absolutely perfect kind of team dynamic this suicide mission needed. With a sigh, he pulled his shoulders back and lifted his head up. Hinata and Lee were counting on him. If having the traitors present was the only way to do it, then so be it. He'd make sure they didn't do anything. Nothing was going to stop him from saving his teammates.

"I had suspected you wouldn't arrive after yesterdays display," Koharu said.

"Shut up you old bat," Naruto said. "I may be a loudmouth, but at least I listen and obey my leader."

"… Fair enough."

"I'd like to ask why all of you are coming on this mission, but I doubt I would get an answer from you. So instead, at least let me know what you are capable of so I know where to place you."

"Surprisingly wise, Uzumaki." Koharu shifted the small satchel on her back. "As a teammate of the Sandaime, I carry a vast array of abilities. I was also Konoha's premier genjutsu user before Kurenai Yuhi."

"What range are you most comfortable with? Do the majority of your genjutsu techniques require the enemy to see you, or can you ensnare them from hiding?"

"Both, place me wherever would be the most advantageous to your plans."

"Fine." He looked at Homura. "You?"

"I have a similar, albeit much smaller, repertoire of ninjutsu to the Sandaime. My unique skills lie in trap making."

"So you need prep time and someone to lead the enemy to you then."

"No, my traps are most useful in the midst of battle. You did hear that I said it was unique, yes?"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard. Freaking Baa-chan." Naruto grumbled and turned to the silent member of their party. "What about you?"

The old woman turned to him with an eerie smile as her wrinkled eyelids scrunched up in an attempt to see him.

"Let me near your food and you'll find out."

"You're a cook?"

"She's a poison expert, Uzumaki," Koharu said as she glanced over at the older woman. "Chiyo of Suna was infamous for her deadly poisons."

"Really? That's cool. I don't know how useful poisoning food would be in battle, but I'm sure Shikamaru will."

"I will be taking the role of medic for this mission," Chiyo said. She gave him an innocent look that conveyed untold horrors. It caused the hair to stand up on the back of his neck. "Unless… you have a problem with that?"

"No, no, medics are good." Naruto waved his hands in front of him nervously. "Well, this should be fun… where the hell is that lazy bastard?"

"You have failed to remember me again, Naruto?"

Naruto turned around and his nervous grin changed into an excited smile.

"Shino! You made it."

"Not only you forget me, but also doubt me. This is not how friends should act, Naruto."

"Glad to see you haven't changed."

"Was I supposed to?"

Naruto just sighed and shook his head. He gave Shino a once over. His friend seemed different somehow. It wasn't something he could see or even accurately explain. Rather, it was a feeling like the bug user had more of a… presence.

"I'm really happy you made it Shino."

"And I am happy that you remembered who I am."

"Are these troublesome conversations going to be common?" Shikamaru trudged up to them with his hands sunk deeply in his pockets. "I knew I should have brought earplugs."

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow as he spotted the three older members of the team.

"Naruto, what's with them?"

"Don't ask." Naruto turned around and started marching for the gate. "Now that everyone is here, let's head out!"

"Aren't you going to give us a plan, Uzumaki?" Homura asked as the rest of the group started after the blonde.

"We can fill it in as we're making our way there. It's a days trek so we don't want to waste any extra time. Don't worry, before we hit Rice country you'll know what to do."

Killer Bee panted heavily in the darkness of his favorite cave. He clutched his right shoulder where his arm had been at one time as he stared at a lone man with orange spiky hair standing calmly in front of him. A sharp black stick was firmly in his grip, and blood dripped off the tip into an agonizing symphony of miniscule splashes. Killer Bee was not a man of doom and gloom. However, something deep within him recognized a deeper meaning to those chorusing drops. The demon within him knew it as well.

It was a countdown. One that would end very soon… and so would he.

Lee's teeth clenched in strain as he tried to will his body to move. His captors had kept him sedated, and only allowed him to be conscious when they brought him his daily meal. He did not know entirely what

was going on. He knew they were Root, and that he was their prisoner. And he knew that two minutes after he woke up his food would be brought to him under heavy guard. It was fairly simple to realize what he needed to do. Escape… although, that was proving significantly more difficult than he had hoped. His body was in a constant state of fatigue, and they purposely left him disoriented.

However, he did have one ace up his sleeve. If the first of the inner gates was opened, the sedative in his system would be burned up before they gave him the next dosage. The problem was that trying to activate the gates in his state was in the same vein as lighting a fire while being under water. Focusing deeper within him, he reached out with his mind in a desperate attempt to find that familiar feeling. It was normally similar to a doorknob that with a twist he could pull open the barrier to his power. Yet, it was like he was trying to fumble around in the dark with numb fingers.

The sound of a heavy metal door creaking open echoed from the far end. It was the signal that his guards would be to him in twenty-three seconds. It was never anymore, and thankfully, never any less. He'd found the weakness of the Root was in their perfectly measured actions. After a while, it became easy to predict them. Spilling such thoughts from his mind, he let his body relax and let a degree of calmness wash over him. Worry, panic, strain, desperation, all these things were unnecessary. The gates would not open on his pleas. They would open because they needed too. It was a simple fact. His body obeyed his will, not some drug that would rob him of all his efforts. He was Konoha's genius of hard work, and this was just another challenge for him to overcome.

The door to his cell clicked, and deep inside his body he felt the first gate crack open.

Naruto pushed off the branch with all of his strength and rocketed high above the treetops. He pulled a shuriken from his pouch and flung it forward as his hands began whipping through seals.

"Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The single projectile burst into a perpetual storm of razor sharp steel. Homura appeared below from the trees and tore through six seals as he sucked in a deep breath. A raging hot jet of flame shot from his mouth and ignited the shuriken barrage.

"Katon: Karyu Endan."

The blonde landed back amongst the trees with a feral smirk as he heard the panicked shouts of the ninja camp as they were bombarded by burning metal. The amount of smoke rising into the sky signaled the camp had been fully engulfed into flames. He leapt forward again as Homura appeared off to his right. He and Shikamaru had both agreed that they should remove any camps they came across. It would make their escape easier, and decrease the threat to Konoha. The trick to doing it had to be eliminating the enemy before there was a chance for them to activate the curse seals Gaara had spoken of. If that happened… then they would be in for a long and likely losing battle.

He spotted the rest of the group ahead and poured on the speed. Jiraiya had gotten him the location of Hinata and Lee under an hour ago. Of course, their location was in the deepest and most secure region in Rice country. It would make an already difficult task harder. Every extra inch travelled increased the risk of discovery, and given the necessity of escape, it was a big risk. Everyone had reluctantly agreed that eliminating camps further away from the village was the best method to keeping the path clear. Once their objectives were acquired, it would be one massive sprint back to the safety of Konoha. They would not have the time or energy to deal with squads that would no doubt be given word of their coming.

"Are they done, Shino?" Naruto asked as he slowed his pace to the rest of the group. Homura did the same.

"Yes, my Kikaichu have detected no living ninja."

"Alright, that makes eight so far." Naruto glanced at Shikamaru. "How many more can we take out without risk of discovery?"

"I would say two at the most. Danzo is no doubt expecting a rescue attempt, but our job is to make him keep looking for a larger group than what we actually have."

"That makes sense."

"There is one flaw in your plan," Homura said. "Danzo will no doubt move the two prisoners if he suspects there is a chance heavy fighting will incur at his base."

"We're not giving him the chance." Naruto looked over at him. "His location is eight hours from this point for a large force. It's two for a single ninja in a dead sprint carrying a message."

"Is that why you let that one ninja escape?"

"Yep, I made sure he saw a group of thirty clones under different Henge amidst the attack. The same clones he can tell are chasing him back to Danzo."

"So they will be expecting a combative force, with a subunit that will break off once the attack commences?" Koharu looked over at the three younger ninja. "You plan to strike before the main force would theoretically arrive? It is an ingenious, though precarious, plan."

"Fighting is going to be inevitable. The only advantage we have is surprise and maneuverability," Shikamaru said. "I don't like it, but it is very likely we'll have to split up."

"Yes, that assumption is correct." Homura kept his eyes forward. "Danzo will no doubt try to break our group up once he realizes there is not a larger group. The benefit to this is that he will not bother to move the prisoners. His mentality will be solidified when he discovers the members of our group."

"Yeah, we know." Naruto reached into his pockets. "You guys and him have made it clear on multiple occasions that you hate young people."

"That is not accurate, Uzumaki," Koharu said. "We never doubted the potential of any of you. We merely felt that you had not reached a point that everything should be rested on your shoulders. That case was true even with you, Uzumaki."

"Yeah, I believe that completely." Naruto shook his head and started passing out little wrapped packages. "These things have an assortment of paper tags in them. The red ones are custom exploding tags. If you have to use them, make sure you get thirty feet back and duck for cover."

"Have you fixed them?" Shikamaru asked. "Since, what I heard last time makes me wary to use them."

"Sure I fixed them. They're twice as powerful now!"

"Naruto, it is not right to try and kill your comrades. Why is this? Because I wish to continue living."

"Anyway." Naruto gave Shino a withering glare. "That should take care of anything in your way. The other seals are more important though. Use them when you fight any Root agents."

"It is difficult to apply a seal in the midst of battle," Koharu said.

"I know, but the fact that Danzo was waiting for our return after I removed Sai's seal never sat well. I'm guessing that he keeps close tabs on all of his lackeys, and that he's immediately aware if they die. This seal will prevent that."

"So that Danzo will not know where we are… an interesting precaution, Uzumaki."

"Careful old bat, that almost sounded like a compliment."

"Perhaps it was."

"Yeah, and Orochimaru didn't like little boys."

"If we do break apart, who goes after whom?" Homura pocketed the package of seal tags. "I would assume the strongest of Root will be kept close to their master's side."

"We'll break off as necessary and design match ups that will give us the advantage." Shikamaru gave a serious glance at each member. "You should put most of your efforts into staying together. We will only split off if not doing so will risk our capture or significantly slow us down. Naruto or I will give the command if that becomes the case."

"Very well. Although, I request that Koharu and I be allowed to deal with Danzo."

"This is not an assassination mission."

"True, but I feel a confrontation is inevitable. If he went to the trouble of capturing them, he will not give them up. Nor will he miss the opportunity to rid himself of you, Uzumaki." Naruto looked over at him. "You were captured by Akatsuki, and yet survived and remained just as powerful. He will still consider you to be the Nine Tails."

"Really?" Naruto gave a feral grin. "Well, I've been itching to beat that bastard into the ground, so bring him on."

"No, leave him to us. You are powerful, Uzumaki… perhaps even more so than we realized. However, Danzo was Sarutobi's rival both of mind and skill. I sincerely doubt he is as crippled as he led us to believe. We stand the best chance of defeating him."

Naruto stared at the old man with a calculating expression. He didn't trust them, and allowing them to be with Danzo alone was asking for trouble. However, they didn't have the luxury of keeping them under

thumb. Baa-chan said that any threat the bastards had posed was no longer a problem. Not very clear, but she hadn't let him down yet.

"Fine. You two get first crack at Danzo. However, I won't keep you in reserve until we get to him. If there is an opponent you can be useful against, you fight them even if it means you might not face the old bastard."

"That is more than acceptable."

"Alright then, let's go say hello."

"How's he doing?" Tsunade asked Jiraiya as he watched Gaara from a distance.

The redheaded leader sat cross-legged in the shade with his eyes clenched shut. His brows were scrunched up in concentration as sweat slowly dripped from his forehead. His shoulder's shook and the fingers trembled so bad that his thumbs barely stayed together. To even the most novice of shinobi, the young man appeared to be under a great deal of strain.

"This kid's as stubborn as the other one," Jiraiya said while he scratched his head. "He's been at this for almost a day now, and doesn't look like he's going to stop."

"Have you tried?"

"No, honestly, he needs this. Suna's destruction would be a heavy toll on any Kazekage, especially one who had worked so tirelessly to improve it."

"Still, killing himself won't help."

"I'll stop him before it gets to that point."

"When he had suggested designing a similar tactic to the one he had used to defend Suna, I had no idea he would take it to this level."

Jiraiya nodded and crossed his arms. It was true. Gaara had suggested converting certain areas around Konoha to sand. It had seemed like a good idea as it would significantly bolster his fighting ability. However, Jiraiya had made sure he pulled the eager leader off to the side afterwards. The conversation wasn't exactly pleasant, but he was surprised at how easily Gaara had listened and adapted.

"So what did you talk to him about, Jiraiya?"

"I told him he needed to change his way of fighting."

"Do you have a death wish? Critiquing his way of fighting is almost the equivalent of blaming him for what happened to his village."

"I know Hime, but someone needed to teach him what he was doing wrong. While annoyed at his short comings, he was actually pretty accepting of what I said. I would go so far as to almost say he was eager to learn. Given his societal status and unique abilities, I doubt he ever really had a serious teacher."

"So you're taking on another student?"

"Not at all." Jiraiya struck a goofy pose. "However, any knowledge from the great Sage Jiraiya-sama should be treated as the ultimate lesson!"

"Be serious you old pervert."

The white haired man chuckled and looked back over at the concentrating boy.

"From what I've heard, Gaara always uses his sand to trap and then crush his opponent. The more powerful the opponent the more sand he uses."

"Meaning he uses a great deal of chakra and repeats the same actions until the result changes. Although, that strategy was in part to the One Tail's desire to absorb blood into the sand. There isn't a more effective means than that."

"Exactly, but I told him to look at it from a different view. His sand can be compressed until it's harder than steel. Why didn't he use skewering or cutting techniques? Why did he try to crush the entire body instead of a single part like Kakashi said he had with that Akatsuki member's head? I mean with his level of control. He could theoretically create a fine cloud of sand that the opponent would inhale, at which point he could remove it from the inside."

Tsunade brought her hand to her chin as her eyes shimmered in deep thought.

"Meaning, he could become an even more devastating ninja than he is now if he just allotted for more versatility."

"Okay Hime, you can say it. I'm a genius."

Tsunade gave him a disbelieving frown.

"Jiraiya-san," Gaara panted. "Could you please procure a ration pill for me? My chakra is beginning to run low."

"It'd be better if you rested naturally, Gaara-dono," Tsunade said as she walked up to him. "This doesn't need to be done in a day."

"If the army goes on the offensive, it can be here in eighteen hours. It will currently take me approximately another twenty hours to complete this task."

"Reports say you can convert basic ground to sand in a matter of minutes. I assumed it would take some time for you to convert a large degree within Konoha, but still…"

"I am not merely converting sand in this area."

"What?"

"Two feet below the surface, I am breaking down another ten feet of earth into sand. This depth will be maintained for a radius of almost half a mile around Konoha, and under the village itself."

Tsunade's eyes widened and Jiraiya gave an impressed whistle.

"I had no idea you were capable of that."

"Neither did I. However, I am pushing my sand as far as Shukaku's chakra will allow me too. The benefit of this method, while it is slower, is that it will provide an early warning to any large force, and it will have been infused with my chakra… which will allow me much greater control."

"You remember what I told you right?" Jiraiya asked. "Even with all this, the results will be the same against the curse seal unless your method changes."

"I know, and I have been considering new methods and techniques. Thank you… Ero-sensei."

Tsunade didn't bother to hold back the laugh the statement brought on. Jiraiya hung his head in defeat as a dejected aura hung over him. However, if one was to look closer, the ghost of a smile was traced on his lips.

Madara watched Pain drop the beaten and unconscious form of the Eight Tails container with a childlike glee. Granted, his mask prevented anyone from seeing it, but the urge to adopt his Tobi persona and dance a jig was almost overpowering. He might not even worry about pretending to be Tobi. It had been years, no, generations of waiting for this moment. The moment where all of his dreams would begin their final assent to fruition.

"Crap!"

Naruto leapt to the side as a fiery blast in the shape of a dragon raced past him. He rolled to his feet as a Rasengan came to life in his hand. Channeling chakra to his feet, he sprinted forward in a powerful rush. The grey skinned ninja just smirked as the blonde swung the orb forward, and a massive wall of mud emerged to take the impact. He glanced to his right as the wall broke apart. Another cursed seal ninja glared at him as she wiped the traces of mud from her mouth.

He growled and flicked two kunai into his hands from under his sleeves. Two small tags dangled freely from their ends. The familiar blue chakra of the wind element coursed down the blade's edge and he flung them at his two opponents. They looked at him in confusion as the kunai wobbled in the air and fell to the ground.

"That was pathetic. I've seen better tosses from civilians," the man laughed.

Naruto smiled, and the tags ignited into small puffs of flame. The wind element enhanced blades caught the fire and fanned them into swirling vortexes that consumed the two enemy ninja. His eyes cut to the side as he heard a large group screaming in terror. Enemy ninja had fear stricken expressions as they cut one another down and Koharu watched impassively. Her hands were twisted up in the dog seal, and when the final enemy fell she released it.

Naruto repressed a shudder. That lady made him uneasy no matter what light she was put under. He focused his attention in the other direction as a grumbling Shikamaru trudged up to him. He didn't blame the shadow user in the least. There had been only one entrance into the base aside from some well guarded windows. The base was built into large cliffs that only allowed access from the front, top, or twenty feet on either side. Even worse was the terrain that housed the small army. It was a vast battlefield with smaller pockets scattered about. The pockets troubled him. They looked like the perfect place to stage traps, or more accurately, they looked like

large arenas. Arenas that made it easy for them to loose sight of each other and easy to get pushed into.

"Hours of plans wasted when I could have been watching the clouds."

"It was night, Shikamaru."

"Whatever."

"It would appear our plans have been made ineffective," Shino said as he appeared behind them. "Given the nature of the mission, retreat is not an option, yes? Then, we must go through do we not?"

"The Aburame is correct. Our mission is compromised if we do not act now. There will not be another chance." Homura landed next to them. "Orochimaru was truly sick indeed. He shaped the terrain specifically so he could isolate ninja and then watch them fight from his base. The funnel effect makes it a formidable fortress, and I doubt we would have any luck burrowing in from another direction."

"We also need to keep in mind that Orochimaru loved to use the underground," Naruto started walking forward. "When you get to the base, head down not up."

"Don't you mean if?" Chiyo questioned with a light cackle. "Even Gaara couldn't handle these forces from the safety of Suna's walls."

"Gaara would stomp these guys flat now that he knows what he's dealing with. Everyone knows what to do. Let's go."

"You will not be going anywhere, traitor. Your spilt blood will bring justice to all those who died in vain."

"Huh?"

Naruto ducked as soon as a gleaming blade appeared in his field of vision. The blade changed direction impossibly fast, and he barely had enough time to dodge to the side. He flicked another kunai from

his wrist to block, but the katana cut through it like paper. The attacker stabbed forward, and he flipped over as she spun around. His eyes squeezed shut as he prepared for his head to be removed from the rest of his body. It never happened.

He landed in a heap and stared wide eyed as Shino blocked the blade easily with his forearm. A red stain started to stretch out across the cloth of his jacket, yet his arm remained intact and predominately uninjured. The woman leapt back and brought her sword up to her side again.

"I take it you are well, Naruto?"

"Me? I'm not the one who just stopped a sword with his arm!"

"It is merely a scratch. How you ask? That will be explained at a later time." He put his arm back in his coat pocket and faced the attacker. "All of you should move on, I will be with you shortly."

"No one is going anywhere until that brat dies!" Forty-four inched closer.

"What the hell did I ever do to you? You crazy bi-."

"You prevented retribution from coming down on Sunagakure's head. They killed dozen's of our village's ninja, and all that was done in return was an offer of friendship! It was your fault Naruto Uzumaki. I will kill you on behalf of all of those lives that went un-avenged."

"I had heard rumors that you were dead… Yugao Uzuki," Koharu said. "After you had been removed from Anbu and went on indefinite leave, I assumed your thirst for revenge had gotten you killed."

Naruto glanced over his shoulder.

"You know this psycho?"

"She was a stellar Anbu captain. However, her lover Hayate was killed by the Suna-nin Baki prior to the failed invasion. She became

obsessed with killing the man responsible, and refused to let go of her grievance when we had achieved an alliance with them."

"Don't you dare belittle my rejections of your quick fix! Just because I was the only one who sought to take the righteous path, I was demoted and lost everything. However, I was saved from my immobilizing depression by Danzo-sama. He will return to Konoha as a strong leader, and Suna will pay."

"This is a false statement on your part," Shino said as his bugs started to buzz around him excitedly. "Why is this? I have already stated this before. I will stop you here."

"Naruto, we need to move now," Shikamaru said as he started down the path.

"Right." Naruto nodded. "Catch up quick, Shino."

"That is my intention, Naruto."

Danzo stared out the window and across the battlefield. He would admit only to himself that they had surprised him with their tactics. However, they were foolish to assume his defenses would be left vulnerable. Be it a small stealth force or a large army, his fortress was prepared for any form of conflict. Though it was vexing that they had managed to steer around his main force. It was always a bothersome issue when the enemy came in contact with the last line of defense.

It mattered little. Even should they succeed here, they would have no home to return to. The current captors could be reclaimed at some point in the future. However, it would be easier to deal with the trouble makers now. The Nine Tails had been causing him problems for long enough.

"Torune."

"Yes sir?"

"Your kin and Forty-four are beginning to fight. Eliminate the victor and come up from behind the rest of the group."

"Sir!"

"Fu."

"Yes, Danzo-sama?"

"Take a force to the front and halt their advance. However, do not waste man power on attempting to halt Uzumaki. Measures have been taken to deal with him."

"Understood."

They left in a blur and Danzo was left alone. His bandaged eye throbbed as he slowly reached down to unfasten the metal seals on his arm. The polished brackets fell to the ground with loud clanks. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a syringe of a strange liquid. With a sharp jab, it pierced his arm and emptied the contents into his system.

It was not quite as potent as what was used on the girl, and unfortunately, it was not permanent. Despite gaining a great deal of information from Karin, it was still far from what he knew the Sannin possessed. However, it would serve its purpose for the time being. He would be able to fight to his fullest for a few hours. Given the fact that his old elder allies were here, he would no doubt be called into battle. After all, they were both from the same legendary team. They would be a difficult pair to crush.

For a few moments anyway.

Lee sucked in a deep breath as he stood and faced the iron door to his cell. His guards were late today, a blessing to be certain. He

would need any extra time he could get. Despite the first gate burning up a great deal of the sedative in his system, there was still enough to cause a great deal of fatigue. Each motion felt like a strain on his entire body. Thanks to his training, strain was nothing new or extremely debilitating. However, that did not stop him from hoping his muscles would stop protesting against his movements.

He clenched his fist and slammed the bandaged appendage into the metal barrier. There was a massive bang, followed by a metallic groan, and ending with a stone chipping crash. Lee stepped out of the cell and checked both ends of the hall. No doubt someone heard that. Given the situation, it was better if he didn't fight. The number and strength of his captors was unknown, and the probability of his body failing him did not escape him.

With a steady jog, he started down toward the end of the hall that he always heard them come through. Long agonizing seconds ticked by as he made his way to the door. But, as his hand reached out, it opened. His round eyes widened as he looked up at two Root ninja staring down at him."

"What are you doing out of your cell?"

Lee didn't bother with a response as he barreled straight toward them. They dodged to the side of his punch, and he used it to roll out of the cell block into another hall. Without looking back, he took off down the hall. The absence of his weights made it much easier to maintain a higher speed despite his fatigue. A sense of relief washed over him. This speed was maintainable, and few would be able to catch him. The relief died as he felt two chakras spike and turn vile.

Suddenly, two gray blurs appeared next to him and the one to his left kicked him through the nearest wall. He tumbled across the rumble and rolled to his feet with a cough. That kick… it was almost as powerful as his beloved teacher's. His eyes stared at the hole his body had made as two figures stepped in. They were the ones he had gotten past once already. Their masks and cloaks were removed, and in their place were gray skin and sharp teeth.

"Man, I thought you were supposed to be fast!" The one on the left said as he shattered a rock with his foot. "We even gave you a head start."

"It appears he is still struggling with the sedative, Twenty-three. We are also blessed with this power, which significantly enhances our abilities."

"I know Twenty-one. Still, Danzo-sama said this brat was tough. I'd wanted to test my hand to hand against him."

"Why?" Lee choked out as he pulled himself to his feet. "Why do you possess that vile seal? I thought it had died with Orochimaru and Sasuke Uchiha."

"Oh this is a different seal." Twenty three flexed his muscles. "Not as powerful, but the survival rate is much higher."

"It is a shame such an awful thing was brought back into being. However, I am not intimidated by such a crutch."

"You should be young ninja. Our seals are special in comparison to the riff-raff outside. Being the only two Root members to take such a blessing, Danzo-sama rewarded us with a more potent variant." Twenty-one reached out his hand. "You cannot defeat us in your current state, and would have a difficult time even if you were not inhibited. We are brothers of Konoha, Rock Lee. It would be wrong for us to kill you."

"I will not back down to those who would bring harm to my comrades."

"Rock Lee, we are your comrades. Like you, we are Konoha-nin, and seek for our village to be safe and strong."

"You follow Danzo, not Konoha."

"There isn't a difference," Twenty-three said. "He'll make sure Konoha is never weak again. If you go back to your cell and cooperate, you'll be able to see that, be a part of it."

"I am sorry, but that would go against everything that I am. Konoha is already strong, as am I."

"Very well, we shall honor your wish, Rock Lee."

He barely blinked and the two were in front of him. In perfect unison, the two of them attacked. He put up a valiant effort despite his sluggish muscles, but it was not enough to keep up with their combinations. It seemed that wherever one was not, the other one was. There was no room to counter or strike back, and accessing the gates to their fullest was nothing more than a dream. They both struck simultaneously with their palms into his chest, and his entire being seemed to shudder.

His body rocketed backward through three different concrete walls, and crashed into a table in the fourth room. Blood leaked from his mouth, as he struggled to get his feet under him. Pans fell to the ground in a brutal symphony of metal chaos. He stared at the crumbling entrance his body had created. They were coming, and he didn't have enough time to prepare. It was most… troublesome as Shikamaru would say.

He glanced around for an exit. There was none. It was just a stocked kitchen with nothing but a small window that only a child could fit through. His eyes widened as a thought came to him. With all of his strength he raced around and tore through the cupboards. There had to be something, anything that could be used like alcohol. It was a distasteful method, and was it not for the state of his body, he would never consider it. However, there was a strong possibility that the drink could limit the senses of his body. The lifeless limbs wouldn't be a hindrance anymore… if it worked.

A smile stretched across his face as he spotted a small bottle of sake stashed in the darkest corner in the kitchen. He grasped it and

pulled off the top. Desperately, he downed the bottle's contents ignoring the burn in the back of his throat. It was an awful tasting substance, and he would punish himself thoroughly for resorting to such an un-youthful action.

"What the heck are you doing?" Twenty-three asked as he stepped in.

"This… is not good."

"Why, Twenty-one?"

"Hic."

Naruto didn't slow down as he brought his hands up in a cross shaped seal. Twenty duplicates burst into existence and intercepted the charging Root members. The Bunshin grabbed hold of the first wave as spear like shadows erupted from the agents own. The Root ninjas cried out as their hearts were pierced, only for it to turn into a bloody gurgle. Naruto cast a glance back at Shikamaru who had not stopped moving. When had the lazy bastard learned to use his techniques in motion?

The clones dispelled as the group continued forward. Homura seemed to perk up as his eyes darted side to side.

"Uzumaki, stop!"

Naruto slid to a stop a moment before a gauntlet of spikes and explosions engulfed the area a few feet ahead of him. The blonde looked back at the group as they came closer. A nervous smile pasted on his face.

"Th- thanks, old bastard."

"The one who planted these traps here is very skilled. I almost didn't spot them in time." Homura took a cautious step forward. "I will take

point from here on out. It is doubtful this was the only area prepared for our arrival."

"There is no need, Mitokado-san." Fu walked into their field of vision through the smoke of his failed trap. "I was merely hoping to eliminate some of you."

The Root agent removed his mask and cloak revealing the telltale features of a Yamanaka. Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow while Naruto sunk down into a fighting stance. The blonde gave a growl, but the shadow user stepped ahead of him.

"I'll handle this troublesome fellow," Shikamaru kept his eyes trained on their opponent. "You're a Yamanaka right?"

"Many years ago, Nara. However, I tossed aside my connection to that clan to better serve Danzo-sama."

"Great… a clan betraying zealot."

"One with such a simple mind cannot fathom my loyalties."

"Yeah, yeah, you're a stand up guy." He glanced over at Naruto. "Go on ahead. Because of the relationship between our clans, it's my responsibility to put this guy down."

"You sure you're not just going to stare at the clouds after we leave?"

"Nah, I can't do that anymore it seems."

"Huh?"

"Just go."

"He's right, Uzumaki. We should continue," Homura said as he started down the path.

Naruto frowned, but took off after the rest of the group as Shikamaru took a few steps towards Fu.

"So, who gets the first move?"

Shino dodged effortlessly to the side as the purple haired ninja slashed at him again. She was fast. He would give her that. Not only fast, but extremely skilled. Her movements were like a constant dance, each swing of the blade blending seamlessly into the next. Her use of both regular and Kage Bunshin was also well thought out. He was never entirely sure which one was in use until just a moment before it connected. Of course with his current abilities, a moment was almost all of the time in the world. However, it would seem she was not using her full potential. She seemed to lack focus.

"You should cease fighting me. Why? Because you can't defeat me."

"Shut up, traitor."

"Traitor? How do you assume that to be the case?"

She stabbed forward, and he leapt back away from her range. He had been hesitant from attacking back. Primarily, it was due to his lack of control. His body had not had long to acclimate itself to the new colonies within it. Going on the offensive could be dangerous to both him and her. Also, his Kikaichu had reported that her chakra was extremely agitated… a tell tale sign of suggestive genjutsu. It was a difficult type to deal with, because unlike with pure illusionary types, that particular brand of technique was built off of existing feelings or thoughts. From what his insects could gather, an immense amount of rage was being pumped into her psyche, even though little if any of her own actually existed. In short, she was a Konoha-nin under the belief she still hated something that she no longer did… or possibly, it was a hatred she wasn't allowed to let go of.

Normally, it would be a matter of simply unleashing a swarm of Kikaichu and draining her of her chakra until she calmed down. But as he already deduced, she was skilled. The Anbu style vestments did not help matters as well. His father had taught him about them.

Masks that could block all but the strongest genjutsu, and shield the wearer from smoke and poison gas. Armor that was not only difficult to pierce with weapons, but had a slight degree of chakra resistance. Perhaps the most worrisome aspect was the sword.

He had felt it the moment he had blocked it the first time. Not only was it razor sharp, it pushed on his chakra slightly. It wasn't that the blade absorbed it… more that it cut his chakra away from him. It was like his chakra was repelled from him. After that, he had made sure to not engage the katana directly. That was not the problem, however. The problem was how to go about attacking her. The sword and armor would make short work of his Kikaichu, and the stronger variants would undoubtedly kill her.

"I would appreciate it if you would stand down. Why, you ask? I see no benefit in killing you."

"Kill me?" She lifted he mask up slightly and held her blade up to her lips. "Don't be so arrogant. You are strong, but I was once captain of an Anbu squad."

She blew on the sword and a streak of fire ignited along the blade's edge. Her mask fell back into place as she dropped into a fighting stance. Shino nestled his face deeper below the collar of his jacket. The temperature of the area had just jumped to an uncomfortably hot degree. It only grew worse as the fire grew more condensed and brightened.

"I will kill you with Hayate's sword. I will cut down all of Suna and their allies in his name."

"I see. So, this Hayate wished for you to kill in his name?"

She winced slightly. It was nothing more than a slight tension of the muscles. Something that anyone, but an Aburame, would miss. He supposed he was blessed to be one at the moment. Their silence and secrecy had given birth to an acute understanding of body language no matter how small. It was why most of them dressed in

their preferred attire. It was so that they could hide any and all emotive changes. After all, it was their core philosophy that the one who could read the opponent the best was the one that won.

"Don't you speak of him like that! He was a kind man and only resorted to fighting as a last resort."

"Then, this crusade of blood is to satiate your own desires, yes?"

"What, no… I." Her head shook in the negative, like she was trying to shake off something plaguing her mind. "No, stop confusing me!"

"It would appear that you are the one confused. How do I surmise this? Your chakra is fluctuating rapidly."

"Be quiet." She ripped off her mask and held her blade up with a snarl. "I'll remove your head."

"Remove? I am sorry, but you are mistaken." Shino sprinted forward in a blur equivalent to Lee. He gripped the white hot blade, ignoring the hissing sound as the heat ate away at his skin. "You lack the sufficient strength necessary to generate enough force to severe any part of my body with this blade."

She scowled as her hand released the blade. Dropping low, she spun and lashed out with her leg. He calmly stepped back and stabbed the blade down into the ground… millimeters away from her face. She froze as her eyes rested on the polished reflection of herself. They quivered at the twisted and rage contorted image on the mirror like surface.

"Did your loved one wish for you to isolate yourself from your village and swear vengeance upon the very ones he died to protect? I believe that would be false."

"You know nothing about Hayate!"

"I do. For I too am a Konoha-nin with people I care about."

"But Suna-."

"Suna was a village on the threat of collapse that only knew how to fight. They followed a Kage unwilling to adapt and were tricked by Orochimaru into following his solution. They have spent three years trying to make amends."

"Amends will not bring Hayate back."

"And your childish view of vengeance will do no different?"

She flinched at his words like he had physically slapped her. He watched as it seemed something behind her eyes broke. Tears started to leak from the corners, and she slowly brought her gloved hands up to wipe them away. She stared at the tiny drops on her fingertips like she did not understand why they were there.

Shino stepped back and looked down at his skin. Tiny bugs circled tirelessly around the charred skin. They devoured the damaged tissue and secreted a thick tan colored film over the wound. It tingled, but he could already feel relief to the affected area. This particular kind of bug was without a doubt the most useful. It did not require any concentration on his part. They automatically repaired any damage to his body, or more accurately, their hive. However, he needed to keep track of them. The secretion they used was effective, but took a hefty toll on his chakra supply. He would need to make sure not to be so careless with actions.

His eyes drifted down to the woman from behind his dark sunglasses. It would appear that her mind was not fully her own still. He did not doubt it would take time for her to fully recover from the mental shock of being forced out of the subliminal genjutsu. For now though, he would be able to focus on other matters. A shadow flickered on the edge of his vision, and he leapt back with the woman in tow just before a ninja clad in black slammed into the ground where they had stood a moment before.

Shino made sure the ninja in his arms had her footing before letting her go, and facing their attacker as he rose to his feet. The style of dress was different, but unmistakable. It was him. The one his Uncle had warned him of. The true master of the poison nano bugs.

"It is proper that I greet you clansman… or perhaps, I should refer to you as Danzo's Torune?"

Author's Notes:

Okay, a few things to churn out quick before everyone hits review. First, this chapter takes place over the span of almost thirty hours. I just felt it would be boring to talk about how they travelled for that long.

The other thing involves the multiple seals (Koharu and Homura's, Danzo's mind control) and Yugao's indoctrination via genjutsu. I had help from a particular reviewer in ironing out some of the things to make them more believable. There have been a lot of complaints because of the seals (and Hinata), hopefully the explanations will help make everything clearer and more realistic. As for Hinata, don't worry, there is a purpose to all of this. I ask for a little more patience as all of that will be explained in detail next chapter, which will be in three days (regular Saturday update).

So aside from that, sorry about the late update, but you're at least getting two this week.

We're nearing the final arcs so hold on, things are going to be getting pretty bumpy.

Short Out

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 19:

Naruto had experienced a great deal in his life. He had seen and dealt with strange and unbelievable things that most would never dream of. Not once did he falter, or have a thought fail to travel through his mind. When he had been in his first life or death situation with Zabuza, his thoughts raced with fear and methods of escape. His mouth and mind hadn't flinched when facing the overwhelming presence of the Kyubi. It had kept churning in every situation. However, seeing Hinata standing before him in a form fitting battle kimono, with her lavender eyes flashing like a predator about to claim a kill, and the hint of a smug smile tugging at her lips… his mind ceased processing for a minute… or three.

"Good morning, Naruto-kun," she said with a stretch that made sure to draw his attention to her. "I've been waiting for you."

"Pick your jaw up off the ground, Uzumaki," Koharu said. "Something is not right here."

He shook his head. She was right. That was not Hinata. Looked exactly like her, but definitely didn't act like his roommate. His mind lodged back into battle mode, as he started scrutinizing her. She moved the same, well a little more dangerously perhaps. It urged to the surface a long forgotten feeling in his bones. As he inspected her strange eyes, and the faded dark purple vertical slits hidden within them, it clicked. While more feminine, that same confident air radiated about her. That sense of being hunted by a ruthless

opponent… only one creature could produce that feeling of dread. A snake, Orochimaru's trademarked persona.

"I thought Itachi finished you off you damn snake," Naruto growled out.

Hinata threw back her head with a melodiously laugh that had a cold edge to it.

"Oh, poor dense Naruto-kun, my wonderful Naruto-kun. Rest assured, I'm Hinata. Danzo just made me a little more… free."

She stretched her arm out and rolled up the loose sleeves, exposing pale immaculate skin.

"He healed me using the pedophile's preliminary research. I must say, the snake really did have some good ideas."

"So you turned traitor? The real Hinata wouldn't do something like that."

"Traitor? Oh my dear Naruto-kun, you think I'm here because of that old cripple?" She shook her head and walked forward. "Rest assured, I'm here just for you."

"If you were Hinata, then you'd know we don't have time-."

"You'll make time!"

Bloodlust saturated the atmosphere as her chakra skyrocketed. He fought back the urge to take a step back. It was so oppressive compared to her normal chakra. He couldn't deny that it was her, but with a queasy stomach, he admitted it was all too similar to the chakra produced by a cursed seal. What really concerned him though, was that there was no cursed seal. It was her chakra alone.

Just what in the hell had that bastard done to her?

"I have no interest in the rest of you. Leave us." When the elders didn't budge she let loose a burst of chakra that seemed to make the air itself shake. "Now!"

"What do you wish us to do, Uzumaki," Koharu said as she kept a wary eye on the dark haired beauty across from them. "We will stay, or go at your command."

"You're giving me a choice?"

"You are the one in charge."

Naruto decided not to show his surprise and kept focused on Hinata. If he was her sole interest, then it would be pointless to have them remain. Besides, maybe if he stayed he could find out what was wrong and fix it. For Hinata, there was no other alternative.

"You guys go ahead and find Lee. I know you want to fight Danzo, but the rescue comes first."

"Understood." She tossed a glance at Homura who nodded back. "Uzumaki."

"Yeah."

"Good luck."

"… Same to you."

Chiyo walked up beside him as the other two took off down the path.

"I will stay with you. Someone needs to make sure your blood stays in the right part of your body."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Stop ignoring me!"

Naruto and Chiyo barely had a chance to jump back as Hinata's palm crashed into the ground where they had just been, and a small crater was crushed into existence. Hinata stood up as her eyes stared menacingly at the duo. Naruto waved the older woman to the side as he took a step forward. The ex-Hyuga's expression softened back to the sly smile that she had held before losing her temper.

"Sorry about that Naruto-kun… I've wanted you to arrive for so long, that I'm a little impatient." She struck an innocent pose. "You forgive me right Na-ru-to-kun."

Ah, that's what old lady Chiyo meant by blood in the right place. He shook his head again and took a cautious step forward.

"Hinata, I'll always forgive you, but now's not the time. Konoha is in-."

A frown marred her pretty features.

"I don't want to hear excuses Naruto-kun. It's always about Konoha, or Sasuke, or Sakura, or something else. For once, I want to have your undivided attention." A genuinely happy smile formed on her face. "Just like when you kissed me."

"Well you have it so talk." Naruto tried to hide the anger from his voice. This version of Hinata was not something he liked, and because of some unknown factor, he had no idea how to change her back.

"Don't be like that Naruto-kun. I really have wanted to talk to you. To let you know how I feel, and why I ran off that night."

"Why did you run off?"

He had to keep her talking, while he studied her. There had to be a sign, a trace of something that would let him know what Danzo did.

"I was concerned."

"Concerned?"

"That's right. I felt that I was just a replacement for Sakura, a second place prize that you turned to just because she was no longer an option."

"You shouldn't think something like that Hinata."

Come on, what was he missing?

"Then tell me Naruto-kun. Why did you kiss me?"

"I don't know."

"What?" Her eyes narrowed and became cold. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"Honestly, I got kind of caught up in the moment and acted without thinking." He smiled and scratched the back of his head. "I guess I owe you an apology."

If the killing intent had been oppressive before, it was like the air had become a singular lead weight now. She scowled at him and clenched her fists. His eyes caught a very faint red line on her forehead. It was so faint he wasn't sure if he actually saw it, or it was a trick of the growing desperation he felt.

"No! No, do not apologize! That was supposed to mean something to you. It wasn't a mistake. You wanted to kiss me!"

He fought back a grin when that red line became more prominent and was joined with others. So, it was a hidden seal eh? It seemed to react to her anger. No, it was fueling it, making it something much more than it actually was.

"Nope, sorry Hinata." He hoped this worked, because it was going to kill him to do this. "I just slipped up."

"Don't say that!"

"Man, it really was a mistake. I mean, why would I intentionally kiss such a selfish girl?"

"Stop it."

The red lines darkened as more continued to appear.

"You've abandoned Konoha because of your silly little feelings." He prayed he could make the next part sound convincing. "Sakura-chan would never do something like that."

"Please."

"She was a lot prettier to, and far better than you."

The red seal fully formed on her head as the vile chakra swirling around her became fully visible to the eye. She lunged forward as a rabid looking lion head engulfed her hand. Its fangs opened wide, and dripped with a dark purple chakra.

"Die! Naruto Uzumaki!"

"What do you mean first move?" Fu asked.

"Given the nature of yours and my clan's techniques, this will play out like a Shoji match. The victor will be whoever can accurately plan out the furthest number of steps ahead."

"Interesting. I had heard rumors of your intellect, but I did not realize you were so straight forward."

"I'm not normally, but I figured you had already assumed the same. It would be too much effort to pretend otherwise."

"I see. Then, you are already aware this little game of ours has begun, yes?"

"Yeah." Shikamaru looked around. "Homura had said that you were skilled with traps. Someone that capable would no doubt make sure to have multiple layers of traps."

"Yet, you chose to enter the field knowing full well you would be ensnared within my web?"

"Nah, too troublesome."

Shikamaru formed the rat seal in his pocket and watched as Fu's shadow swirled and a sharp spear shot out. It pierced the blonde in the back and went straight through. Fu disappeared in a burst of smoke, and a puppet with a seal was left in his place. Shikamaru felt his mind pulled out of his body and into the puppets. He bit back a curse as his vision readjusted to find himself looking at his own body.

"You failed to realize that the wave of Root agents you fought were also part of my trap, and that I know your abilities. I admit I was surprised by your technique. I had heard only the most experienced of the Nara clan were able to move shadows that were not attached to their own."

"I thought someone was watching the exchange," Shikamaru called out through his mind. "Why don't you look inside my jacket."

Fu, in Shikamaru's body, frowned and slowly unzipped the jacket. His eyes widened at the hissing exploding tag attached to the inside.

"I was repressing the detonation with my chakra. Without access to my chakra, you can't stop it."

"Such a foolish ploy." Fu reached down to pull it off.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. I'm not careless enough to allow someone to tamper with it."

Shikamaru found it strange to see his own face glaring at him.

"I can still leave this body before the explosion occurs. You will have only succeeded in killing yourself."

"Only if you can figure out when the tag goes off. Too soon, and I can stop it."

There was nothing for a moment. The Root member was no doubt calculating the chances of success. Suddenly, he felt himself pulled from the puppet and back into his own body. He quickly pulled out the twin trench knives that Asuma had just given to him. They were a final present for the completion of his master's training session. Two tags hung down from the pommels and danced in the soft breeze as his eyes skimmed the surrounding landscape.

The ground crunched below him and he lunged forward as a sharp blade sliced the tips of his hair. He rolled up and brought his knives up in a defensive position as Fu hurtled towards him. They clashed in a series of sparks, as Shikamaru struggled to keep up. His experience with the trench knives was still limited, and matched against someone with a great deal of weapon experience was not favorable for his odds. Fu made a quick lunge and the two knives were knocked from his grip and high up into the air.

Shikamaru leapt back and tried to form a hand seal with his broken fingers. The disarmament of his weapons had snapped the thin bones ruthlessly. He formed the first seal with an audible pop and crack. The shadows started to form, but Fu quickly formed a box shape with his own hands.

"Shinranshin no Jutsu."

Shikamaru felt his entire body go rigid. Fu gave a small smug grin, and gave the box a twist. The shadow user felt like his legs almost snapped, and he collapsed into the dirt with a grunt. The sound of something else impacting the dirt caused a grin to form on his face despite the pain in his appendages. He looked to see one of his trench knives buried deep in the shadow of his opponent. It had been a gamble, but the knife had landed where he had wanted it to.

"Knowing you could not defeat me in weapon combat, you made it appear as if I had disarmed you so that you could limit my movement. Impressive, but unfortunately for you, it is a worthless action. At best we are in a stalemate where the chakra in your knife will run out long before I do. At worst, I can dispel my technique and activate my traps before you can stand."

"You could, but I don't think either of us is going anywhere."

Fu's eyes widened as he heard a hissing sound behind him. Shikamaru gave a pained grin as one of Naruto's exploding tags shifted out from behind the shadow tag of his trench knife.

"It really is kind of troublesome."

The entire arena was engulfed in a powerful explosion that rocked the ground itself… and fire reached high into the sky.

"Are you ready, Homura?" Koharu asked as several Root members collapsed to the ground as they strolled into the base. "There is little doubt where our journey ends."

"If I were not ready, I would not have offered to come. And you?"

"I have trouble believing it is Danzo that we are facing. I always assumed if we were to fight anyone it would have been Tsunade."

Homura chuckled.

"You truly did not like her did you?"

"I have always and still do feel that she was a spoiled brat who did not live up to her potential as Hokage."

"Agreed, although she has the same love for the village as all the Hokage before her."

"Yes, and that is the only reason that she has been tolerated for so long." Koharu sighed and shook her head. "I must admit on one fault of my own."

"And that is?"

"I never groomed the next generation as I should have. I was content in pointing out flaws."

"I never thought you would have admitted a flaw like that." She swatted at him playfully, and he chuckled lightly. "You haven't swung at me in years."

"I grew wiser."

"You grew older."

"As did you."

"Yes. I agree with you that we should have put more into those that would follow us. I guess our own mortality was blinded from us by our authority."

"Perhaps." Koharu stopped in front of the door ahead of them. She could tell what was beyond the door. It caused her heart to beat just a little faster, like the first dangerous mission had done when she was a genin. "Do you believe we are making the right choice?"

"It is too late to turn around, Koharu."

"I know."

The two embraced each other in a hug, like two old friends saying goodbye. They pulled away from each other, and Homura grabbed the door handle.

"You ready?"

"Lead the way, dead last."

Homura chuckled and pushed the door open. They stepped in quietly. Danzo stood facing out the window. His arm free of the bandages, and ten Sharingan blinked excitedly as the two Konoha elders walked up closer.

"I am surprised that it is the two of you that came to oppose me, Koharu, Homura."

"We have helped in the realization of your plans, and turned a blind eye to your activities more so than we should of. Your arm is proof of that," Koharu said as she and Homura pulled off their small packs and tossed them to the side. "It is only right that we seek penance for our mistakes."

"Mistake?" Danzo turned slowly. His good eye glaring down at them. "You now deem a strong Konoha a mistake?"

"No," Homura said as he pulled several scrolls from his robe's pockets. "We deem the dictatorship that Konoha would ultimately fall into under your care a mistake."

"I see. You have lost the will to see Konoha reach its golden age."

"Your use of that rabid seal you placed on that Hyuga girl is proof that any age would be tarnished."

"So you know?"

"We are aware that you know many forbidden seals. All of us had discussed their usage at one point or another. For her to be so far gone, you no doubt used one of them."

"I needed to control her for her to be useful. She lacked the blinding rage of Yugao that would have made her easy to feed and manipulate. Given that she was on the verge of death, which as you know, is the only way to apply such a seal, it would be foolish to lose the opportunity."

"Taking away people's free will and using them so recklessly. Why?"

"I sacrificed her eyes so that the Nine Tails is stopped. "

"A waste of life." Koharu peered at him sternly. "Forbidden seals feed off their host's chakra, killing them within minutes after fighting begins. No worthwhile Kage would ever waste their ninja in such a way."

"Considering both of you have similar seals on your arms, it is hypocritical of you to speak." The two elders gave the faintest hint of surprise. "Your chakra is far to low for the amount of fighting you have encountered. A forced loyalty seal is the only logical culprit. You would commit ineffectual suicide for that weak woman?"

"Enough, Danzo." Koharu slowly started going through hand seals. "We all know that talking is meaningless."

"Very well. Answer me this though, why choose to come when only death awaits you?"

"Because," Homura settled back into a loose stance as he brought his scrolls up. "Someone needs to soften you up for, Uzumaki."

"The Nine Tails? You put your faith in that hopeless blonde creature?"

"Yes. Being so close to death, it would be nice to see things through Hiruzen's eyes just once," Koharu said.

"Foolish sentiment."

"Perhaps, but he is surprisingly good," Homura said. "It is actually a little disappointing not seeing what will become of him."

"Then I shall put your mind at ease." Danzo pulled his sword out of the cane that rested on the wall beside him. "By some miracle, if he survives and remains in control of the Nine Tails, I will take that power, and use it to ensure Konoha's power.

The Sharingan in the center of his palm blared to life.

"Just as I should have done sixteen years ago."

"The name is Torune, Aburame. I am no kin to you."

"I see."

Shino noted the gray skin that covered his opponent's gloveless hands. It caused the insects within his own body to stir anxiously. No doubt about it, those were the poison nano bugs. His mind shifted back to the warnings his uncle had given him.

"Ne, nephew-chan, that guy's a master of those little bastards. Don't think yours are going to be able to neutralize his attacks. You don't have that kind of strength yet, so make sure you use the others ones. Just be careful, you mess up and they'll kill you pretty damn quick!"

Shino brought his hands up as the calming buzz of his Kikaichu flooded his ears. The insect cloud rushed forward and quickly consumed the enemy in an angry swarm. He watched patiently and took note of how his opponent would act. His regular Kikaichu were too underdeveloped to pose any risk, but they could be an excellent distraction. He frowned from behind his collar as the buzzing rapidly diminished, and a growing pile of dead Kikaichu appeared at the base of Torune's feet.

The Root member had pulled off his shirt to reveal a torso completely consumed in dark grey. It meant there were a significantly greater number of insect on his person than anticipated. Shino estimated at least five times what his nano count was. It would make it difficult to get close and place the needed type of Kikaichu. The nano breed could be carried by his regular, but not that kind.

"Give up, Aburame," Torune said as he pulled out two kunai. "Your ordinary hive is no match for mine."

"That is an incorrect assumption. Why, you ask? You lack a full knowledge of my abilities."

"Don't be so full of yourself kid. You might be Shibi's son, but that doesn't mean much against a superior breed."

"I must repeat myself. You lack a full knowledge of my abilities."

Shino checked to make sure his new companion was out of the way. She still appeared to be out of it, but was slowly sobering up. A massive explosion from farther up ahead rocked the field. That must have been one of Naruto's tags. He would have to refrain from using them if he wished to live. Although, that brought up the question of who resorted to using it.

Torune flung the kunai at him, and he was snapped from his thoughts. He zipped forward, and judging from the traitor's reaction, he caught him off guard with his speed. The Root member pulled out more kunai and launched another barrage. Yet, Shino zigzagged effortlessly between them. He brought his fist up as he prepared to strike the top of his opponent's mask. It was the only safe place to strike. He froze as he heard a loud cry of anguish from behind him. Breaking off the attack, he twisted toward the sound.

The female ninja he had rescued had collapsed to the ground as a mass of gray was quickly traveling up her skin. He watched as the kunai thrown seemed to leak the same substance. So, his opponent had laced his weapons with the bugs? He quickly sprinted forward and grabbed her as he simultaneously released his own nano bugs. It was the only chance he had to save her. His father would berate his reckless actions, although he would be absolutely disappointed if he let a fellow Konoha-nin die.

He watched as his nano bugs dove into the mass of the enemies swarm. His own chakra fed them, causing them to quickly overpower the smaller mass. A few of his Kikaichu traveled down his fingers and began to suck out the poison he had recently gained immunity

to. He let her rest as his own bugs retracted to him, and he climbed to his feet.

She stirred and was quickly on her feet. Her eyes sharper than he had seen earlier. The pain from the bugs had apparently jolted her from her stupor. That was good. Although, she still had a directionless look about her. He looked down at his body and the splotches of gray that seeped through his clothes. It would appear that his opponent's trap was effective. While he tended to the girl, the remaining nano bugs had begun to attack him. It was expected that such a thing would happen. His father would be so upset with him.

"You should have let the woman die. Then you may have had a chance to escape," Torune said. "Now, you'll both have to die."

"I do not believe she will be as simple as an opponent as you claim."

"I'm sorry," Yugao said as she clutched her forehead. "My jumbled mind is putting you in harms way. Had I not been so self-involved, I would have seen his attack easily."

"The pain was beneficial in releasing you slightly from your thoughts, yes? It is for the best then." Shino faced Torune. "Besides, his only advantage is now gone. Why? He cannot give me a new infection on top of my old one. Therefore, his attacks are now useless. He has to wait for me to die, and he will be finished long before that."

"You're death is already assured. Yet, you think you can still win. The pain you must be feeling is completely debilitating. Let the bugs consume you quickly, and spare yourself the anguish."

"Anguish? You call this anguish?"

Shino blasted forward and slammed his fist across Torune's face with a sickening crush. Nano bugs swarmed his fist and started devouring it.

"You must die at least six more times for you to grasp what true anguish is."

Torune stared through his broken goggles with a look of awe.

"You mean, you've taken in all of them?"

"I do not reveal secrets to clan traitors."

"Doesn't matter." Torune stood up. "You can't beat me down fast enough to escape the effects of my attack."

"I no longer have a need to hit you. Why? My attack has already landed."

"What are you-?" Torune paused as his eyes drifted down to a growing black dot on the side of his face.

"That is the other breed that rivals the rarity of your nano type… the tic type."

Torune tried to pull the growing bug off, but it wouldn't budge.

"It lodges its powerful mandibles and legs into your skin. As it feeds on your chakra and blood, it grows and digs deeper into the tissue. Even if you attempt to remove it, the head will detach and burrow deep within your system. The thick exoskeleton will prevent your nano type from killing it before it can kill you."

"I've got more than enough blood and chakra for it to feast on while my hive destroys it."

"Again, you underestimate me and my colonies." Shino pushed his glasses up as the last of his skin was covered by the enemy bugs. "The blood crystallizes instantly in its body, and the chakra adds ever increasing pressure on it. The bug will continue to eat until it explodes, and the crystallized shrapnel is blown through the weakest part of its body… its belly."

Torune looked down as fear covered his features. He went to shout, but the noise never made it to his lips.

Shino did not bother to look at the outcome. The sound alone let him know he was the victor, and that his enemy was no longer as heavy above the shoulders. The female ninja looked at him with a worried and guilt ridden gaze. It was unneeded. He was already using his own chakra to mass produce both his own nano bugs and the healing type. Granted, the feeling of having a war inside his body was unpleasant. However, if he could keep this level of control there was a chance he would survive… or his own colonies would join in the destruction of his body.

With that thought, he passed out.

Naruto amazed himself sometimes. Whether it was the ingenuity of his seals, or the awesomeness of an attack, there was always a time where he had the urge to summon a Kage Bunshin and pat himself on the back. The fact that he had found out about Hinata's seal was one of those moments. The fact that he had figured out how it worked had made him want to dance around. The fact that he had developed a plan that made the seal visible pushed him dangerously close to labeling himself a genius. However, his current situation was not making such options available.

Let it be said, Hinata scared the ever loving crap out of him.

The few glimpses of the seal he had caught while dodging for his life had revealed a lot of information. They were emotional enhancement seals. Ero-sensei had explained that some villages had used them during the wars to boost the bloodlust of their troops. When used effectively, they were a powerful tool. However, not many had detailed knowledge of seals. So it commonly became obsolete, because ninja's would become blind by a haze of bloodthirsty rage. It also put a dangerous pull on their chakra.

He had to admit. That old bastard Danzo knew how to use the seals effectively. Right now, Hinata had so much rage and jealousy being pumped into her system she could electrify an ocean with a Raiton jutsu. He absently noted that he probably had a hand in that. What was it about him that always seemed to bring out the worst in violent prone kunoichies? It didn't really matter. He promised if he survived this he would never make Hinata mad ever again.

She launched a wave of chakra at him, and he narrowly dodged to the side. He'd been playing tag for almost five minutes. The flashes of light from the base up ahead had started to be come much less frequent, and the explosion from Shikamaru's location had him on edge. However, he couldn't figure out how to deal with Hinata. The seal would force her body to keep fighting until it literally killed her, and she was just too strong to mess with an extraction. He wasn't Jiraiya who could draw up something in the middle of a fight.

The other problem was that he had no clue as to how the seal was integrated into the sudden changes in her body. He knew something had happened. She was unnaturally flexible, and any hits he landed on her healed way to fast for a non-Jinchuriki. Hinata was difficult enough to fight with before. Now, she was just impossible. Her new physiology didn't really matter to him, but if it upset her, then Danzo had better start praying.

"What are you doing, Naruto Uzumaki?" Chiyo asked from the side. "While you are dancing around, your friends are falling."

"One thing at a time lady!"

"Well, this one thing is taking up too much time. Defeat her and be done with it."

"I can't. The seal on her head will make her keep fighting until she dies. I have to remove it quickly first."

"Boy, I have a decent understanding of seals. Even I can tell you are ignoring a very obvious thing."

"What?"

Naruto kicked Hinata in the face as hard as he could bring himself to. Her head snapped back, and she was sent tumbling across the ground.

"You already know that the seal cannot be removed."

"Any seal can be removed. You just have to figure out how."

"Well, while you have been trying to figure out how all other fighting has stopped. I do not know who is victorious. However, I can assure you at least that Danzo was. Are you going to let him escape given you have an unprecedented opportunity to end his threat once and for all?"

"Of course not! I just need to-."

"You are being indecisive!" Chiyo spoke with such force that Naruto could not help but look at her. "That man is going to escape, and with it, so does any chance of preventing the tragedy of Suna from repeating itself."

"I'm not killing Hinata!"

"Then you are a failure as both a shinobi and a friend!"

Naruto felt like a bucket of ice water had been dumped over his head. He stood wide eyed as his eyes drifted over to Hinata. He was failing her? That- that couldn't be right.

"Perhaps you do not understand the full weight of forbidden seals. It does, of course, enhance the mind and body of existing feelings to a dangerous level and devour chakra. Yet, it also acts as a mind manipulation seal. Those seals will control the majority of the brain. However, a small part of the person remains lucid. Right now, Naruto Uzumaki, there is a part of that girl crying over hurting you, crying over distracting you from your responsibilities."

"You don't know anything about Hinata you old hag!"

"Any kunoichi worth her salt would feel that way. You just refuse to see that because you are a coward."

"Shut up, I'll save Hinata and stop Danzo."

"That is impossible, and you know it. I was told that you want to be the Hokage. If that is true, then you must show me now you have what it takes."

"I wouldn't be a good Hokage if I turned my back on my friends."

"That is selfish sentimentality child. Being a Kage is not about jutsu or strength of being. It is not about strategy or how loved you are. To be a Kage, you must make the decisions no one else will be able to. Can you put your own selfishness aside to do what is right for your village? Self-sacrifice is noble, but ultimately will lead to failure. When the time comes, would you be able to send young ninja out to a certain death? Could you sacrifice your friends?"

"Shut up! If I do what you say then I'm no better than Danzo!"

"Danzo uses his minions as tools. I never said not to treat them with kindness and respect."

"But-."

"Did you not learn from your mistakes with the Uchiha?"

Her sharp tone caused Naruto's breath to catch in his throat and an unwanted epiphany burst in his head. Sasuke… this was the same as with Sasuke. Everything bad that had befallen him and Konoha lately was because he wouldn't let Sasuke go. He clenched his eyes shut. It was the same mistake again. Why? Why couldn't he save everyone? Was it so wrong to want to save his friends? His eyes opened and slowly drifted to the highest window of the base. That

unmistakable shadow within it looked at him, and then turned away. Danzo was leaving, and he was still down here.

"Damn it!"

Naruto charged a Rasengan in his palm and blasted forward. Hinata rushed forward as well. He watched as they came closer together. Her rage induced attacks were powerful, but they lacked the grace and precision of her regular abilities. So it was a simple matter to dodge her first palm strike… and bury the Rasengan into her stomach. He watched her eyes widen as the seal faded and burned off her forehead. He remained silent as those strange and beautiful lavender eyes drifted over to him. He forced his own smile when she gave him one of hers.

Then those eyes closed. The smiles faded. He caught her gently and laid her out on the ground. His mind going blank and his body moving on its own. He summoned a Bunshin to stand guard over her cooling body, and took a firm step towards the base. Then another and another, until he was marching forward with his head held high and his feet hitting the ground with a sure step. If he looked back his resolve would shatter, instead, he would let his Bunshin cry for him.

His eyes morphed. His birthmarks darkened. His nails lengthened. There would be no escape for the one that he sought. No solace or mercy would be extended. That man had taken too much from him… from Konoha. It was his responsibility, and only his. He could feel that man waiting for him deep within the base. An unspoken desire for both to challenge their philosophies against each other. A desire to finally gain control of the beast within. Yet in the end it didn't matter.

His Hinata was dead.

And the man responsible was going to meet the true fury of a demon.

Yamato looked down at his palm as he felt the blood in it stir. His eyes grew wider as the number in the center continued to climb higher. Without waiting to see where it would end, he launched himself off the rooftops. Something was wrong. When Naruto accessed that purple cloak, his mokuton abilities wouldn't notify him. This meant that the blonde was using the red one… something that felt much more like the Kyubi itself. The Hokage tower appeared in the distance and he pushed off harder with his legs. The Sannin would have a plan. They had to.

As he leapt into the air… six morphed to seven.

Gaara's eye snapped open. He quickly sat up in his hospital bed. When had he? Ah yes, he had collapsed after completing the sand trap. Perhaps, it was foolish for that extreme amount of effort. He had finished an entire day ahead of preparations. Slowly, his feet fell over the edge of the bed. The chakra within the sand was picking up massive reverberations. That army was coming. He stumbled as he tried to take a step forward. Had he ever felt this tired before?

"What are you up to, Suna gaki?" Jiraiya asked from the doorway. "You might have a Biju's worth of chakra, but chakra exhaustion is still a dangerous thing."

"They're coming."

Jiraiya's expression became more serious.

"How long?"

"Hours, but it doesn't matter. They will never come that close to the village." Gaara gave a tight grin, something that looked unpracticed at best. "I can't say I never make mistakes, but I do learn from them quickly. I was a fool for always relying on vast quantities of sand. Now, I shall rely on the opposite."

"What are you planning?"

"To use what you were kind enough to teach me." Gaara's expression melted back into its normal deadpan. "Ero-sensei."

The Naruto Bunshin stared down sadly as tears dripped down his cheeks. Despite being a copy, he could still feel what his boss did. Boss… what he had to be going through not being given any time to stare at the girl he had feelings for. It made him feel somewhat relieved that his presence in this world was brief. He crouched down next to the friend that had died by his own hand. Guess he would never get a chance to sit down and talk with her. To try and work things out.

He clenched his hands in the dirt as his shoulders ached. This wasn't good. Boss had been plentiful in giving him chakra. Wasting it on generating tears wasn't smart. However, that did little to prevent it.

"Dry your tears, Naruto Uzumaki," Chiyo said as came up next to him.

"Just, please be quiet."

Chiyo sighed and knelt down beside Hinata's still form.

"Do you know why I came on this mission?"

"To be our medic… not that it did a lot of good."

"Incorrect, I joined because I had planned on killing you."

"What?" Bunshin's head snapped up in alarm.

"You were responsible for the death of my grandson… the Akatsuki member named Sasori."

Bunshin's eyes stared at her in disbelief. So, that was why she pushed him into killing Hinata. It was to make him feel the same loss

as she had. No… that wasn't it. She had said she had planned. It meant something had changed.

"Why aren't you going to now then?"

"When news reached Suna, I was prepared to hunt you down. My grandson had disappeared years before, and I desperately missed him. You had taken away any chance of a reunion. However, I waited."

"Why?"

"This was the same child that had turned the human weapon, Gaara, into a respected and caring Kage. I decided to gain more information on you. To understand what kind of person you were and then pass judgment."

Bunshin looked up with an inquisitive expression.

"What… did you find?"

"Praise of your guts and courage, but that wasn't what was important. What was truly important was that it brought me out of isolation." She looked over at him. "For many years, I hid myself from a village I helped create. A village intent on being alone and lashing out at anyone to prove their strength, and that culminated in a leader ordering me to use an unstable seal on his son… Gaara."

"You sealed Gaara?"

"Yes and the task disgusted me to the point I wanted nothing more than to be left alone with my brother." She gave a weary smile. "Imagine my surprise when the village was so different from when I had turned my back on it."

"Different?"

"Yes, Gaara had made it prosperous, and the friendship it had built with Konoha had resulted in a great weight being lifted. All of it, I

discovered, was indirectly because of a single loudmouthed blonde that had more guts than brains."

Bunshin bit back a pitiful snort.

"When this mission became available, I felt it was finally time to see this person for myself. If he did not meet my expectations, then I would kill him."

"A part of me wishes you had." Bunshin looked back down at Hinata. "I… I know that there wasn't any other option, if we wanted to stop Danzo. It wasn't our original mission, but passing up an opportunity like that would have been stupid. But still-."

"As I said before, dry your tears." Chiyo pressed her palms down on Hinata's belly. "This jutsu I developed, it will save this girl."

"What?" Bunshin nearly leapt to his feet as a wary smile crept up on his face. "Why didn't you say that it the first place?"

"Because then I could not see your resolve."

Bunshin's rant died on his lips.

"You are kind, child. At one time, I thought that it never had a place in the world of shinobi. However, you have proven it to be a great strength. Yet, you still let it prevent you from doing what must be done. I had to see if you had what it takes to be a Hokage."

Bunshin's mouth dropped. The old hag had been testing him?

"So that's what it means to be in charge. I have to be willing to kill my friends?"

"No, quite the opposite. It means you will do what is best for your friends, and ignore your own personal feelings." Chiyo's hands started to glow blue. "It is easy to proclaim what you will do. It is another matter entirely to actually go through with it. Your

determination will save many people, but you must be able to do what you did today, no matter how rare it may be."

"I don't know if I can. Right now, I feel like my heart won't stop screaming."

"If you are weak in something, you make it strong. If something ever causes you defeat, you make sure such a thing can never occur again. Turn your losses into victories, and never forget the people who died to make sure your village stands strong. This will make you a Kage."

Hinata sucked in a lung full of air as the light disappeared into her abdomen. Bunshin smiled as he leaned over, and Chiyo sat back. Her face was drenched, and she was growing paler by the second. The clone jumped up.

"I need to dispel and let Boss know!"

"No," Chiyo wheezed. "Do not let him know yet."

"Why?"

"Will he kill Danzo out of rage, or because it will keep his village safe? Will he see benefit in the man and spare him? He must find the answers without knowing the benefit of knowing everything is okay. Do you understand?"

"… I think so. You want to know if the Boss will do this for himself, or for his village."

"Correct." Chiyo smiled. "A good Kage will do what must be done merely because it must be so. His own personal motivations, or even philosophies, must take second place to the needs of the village. It is something that man, Danzo, does not understand."

She winced and rested on her back.

"Hey, hey old lady what's wrong?" Bunshin went over to her quickly and propped her head up with his arm. "You're not feeling well?"

"The jutsu I used transferred my life-force to the girls.

"But, that means-."

"It is okay. I have lived longer than I probably should, and caused a lot of trouble. At least in doing this, I can say my last act was noble."

"Thank you." Bunshin gave the best smile he could. He wouldn't demean her gift by pitying her. "I'll make sure to become the greatest Hokage ever."

"I'm… sure… you… will."

He felt her go limp in his arms, and he gently rested her on the ground. The smile didn't leave his face. This old woman, who he didn't even know, had done something so wonderful for him. He would not disgrace her choice by being sad in front of her. His Boss would laugh, and continue to be kind. The type of Hokage she had put her faith in.

His ears picked up on movement behind him. He glanced back and saw that purple haired ninja carrying two bodies with her. It was Shino and Shikamaru. He was on his feet instantly and ready to fight. As long as he didn't get hit, he could keep fighting. Boss left him in charge of guarding everyone, so that was what he would do."

"Relax," Yugao said as she came up to him. "I am not your enemy."

"Yeah right."

"She is right, Naruto," Shino said weakly. "How do I know this? Because I broke the genjutsu used on her."

"Oh… okay?"

Bunshin relaxed slightly and glanced down at Shikamaru. The shadow user was covered in black ash from head to toe. So, he had been the one to use the custom tag… and it was at close range.

"Hey… is Shikamaru okay?"

"Yeah, I am."

"You're hair is smoking."

"Troublesome."

Bunshin spun around as a gigantic explosion sounded from the direction of the base. A huge chunk of the roof had been blasted off. Was it Boss? He watched as a figure appeared in the smoke standing on the crumbling edge making an awful sound. Flames licked at the figure's feet from the burning inside of the building. Suddenly, a light breeze swept through and pushed the smoke aside. The figure was revealed to be Lee. He was holding a Root agent above his head and howling like a gorilla that had just defeated his opponent and been made king of the jungle. Lee turned and threw the agent back into the fire and then looked back out across the battlefield.

"Yosh!" Lee cried out so loud it seemed like a roar. He ripped open the chest of his spandex suit. "Gai-sensei!"

Bunshin felt an uncomfortable sweat trickle down the back of his neck. What the hell had they done to Lee? A seal shouldn't technically work on him, since it relied on the same principle as genjutsu. He went rigid when Lee's eyes locked down at him. The green clad ninja leapt high up into the air and did a series of flips before landing right in front of Bunshin.

"What are you looking at, bastard… hic," Lee said with droopy and accusing eyes. "Where the hell is Gai-sensei?"

"Um, Lee, careful I'm just a Kage Bunshin." The clone put his hands up in an effort to calm the intoxicated ninja.

"Uh, wh- what?"

"I'm Naruto's clone."

"You're an imposter?"

"What, no I-."

"Imposter!"

Hinata sat up with a groan, and both of them turned their attention to her. Bunshin felt a wave of relief wash over him. Lee seemed to take an unusually long glance at her, before a cloud of depression seemed to hover over his head.

"What a beautiful girl," Lee said with a sniff. "I'd like to know a beautiful girl. Beautiful girls never pay any attention to me."

"Lee… buddy?"

Lee's head snapped around.

"I bet if I kick your ass the beautiful girl will like me. Gai-sensei will be so impressed."

Lee swung around with a loopy kick, and Bunshin just barely managed to dodge. He couldn't let himself get dispelled. He'd promise the old lady that his Boss would do it on his own. Lee went to move again, but stumbled and landed face first in the dirt. He didn't get back up. Bunshin sighed in relief, and turned to Hinata. The poor girl was looking at her kimono and blushing up a storm.

"Where's Danzo?" The purple haired lady asked.

"The real me is fighting him right now I think."

"We should go assist you then."

"No way." Bunshin crossed his arms stubbornly. "We need to set up a safe place for everyone to recover. Leave that old bastard to the Boss."

"Very well. I shall respect your command, since I have proven unfit to lead for some time."

"Okay, let's set up a hideaway. Then, I need you to go get the other two old bastards. You seem to be in the best shape after all."

"… Understood."

Author's Notes:

Please Read and Review.

Okay some quick things.

First) I hopefully explained the forbidden seal and Yugao's condition sufficiently. In summarization, forbidden seals (be it loyalty, emotional, or mind control) constantly feed off a person's chakra. If chakra is not used for anything else, then the body can produce enough chakra to live. However, given how often ninja use it for fighting, it is ultimately fatal and useless in a field situation.

Yugao was under Danzo's manipulations, but she did originally feel and think how she has up to this point. However, her pain and anger would have faded naturally. Danzo used his Sharingan to prevent that, so the wound remained fresh so to speak.

Second) I was surprised by just how many people wanted a drunk Lee fight. I ultimately decided not to add it in. Part of it was because I couldn't find a good spot to insert it, and the other is because it would have just been a half page of him thrashing the two Root

members. If it is any consolation, in the future I will keep the idea of a fight using his drunken fist.

That said… I think that is all I have to say for now.

See you next week.

New Wind

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 20:

Eight red tails swayed ethereally as he crept along the dark halls. He gave a small sniff in the air. There it was that vile scent. He followed it deeper into the base, a labyrinth of halls and stairs that seemed to get darker with every new area. Yet, its structure was irrelevant. He didn't care as long as he was heading for that man. Forward, moving forward was all that mattered to him. Not even the chakra nipping at his skin like a thousand beestings drew his eyes away from his chosen direction.

The chakra burned his skin even in its rather docile state. It was just around him, not lashing out at anything. For the first time in his life, he had complete control of this demonic power. Granted, he knew his anger was being fed by it, but it was only a fuel to his basic instincts. There wasn't another consciousness attempting to wrench control of his body away from him.

He walked through the next doorway into a large open cave. His red eyes roamed the untamed rocky expanse. Dotted columns of stone crept from the ground and ceiling like jagged teeth. His eyes settled on a lone man standing proudly in the center of the cave. A snarl escaped from his throat, and he used all four limbs to launch himself down from the cliff. He landed as gracefully as any large cat, and glared hatefully at the bandaged man before him.

Danzo calmly held his hand up, and the Sharingan in his palm opened wide. Naruto growled as he felt the power around him being pushed back into the seal. It wasn't as strong as Sasuke's. He could

resist it if he tried hard enough, but at this current point, it would be more effort than it was worth. Sure, not using the Kyubi's chakra would make things more annoying. However, it wouldn't change the outcome.

"So, you've got a Sharingan. Why am I not surprised?" Naruto said as he stood to his full height.

"It should come as no surprise that I would posses such a potent weapon."

"Save me the long winded speech about fancy eyes and Uchiha's." Naruto's eyes became colder. "I'm here for your head."

"You come to me for blood? That is a pathetic and selfish excuse."

"Oh trust me. I want nothing more than to kill you. I think I might even go so far as to say I will enjoy it. You've been causing me pain since before I can remember."

"Ah, so you found out your lineage? Yes, I was the one that sent Kushina Uzumaki away."

"Kind of pisses me off that you admit it so casually given what it did to my life. But, that doesn't bug me half as much as what you did to Hinata."

Danzo's good eye cracked open.

"So, the beast has fallen for the beauty?"

"Whether I have or not doesn't matter. You messed with my friend, and before I kick your ass all over this cave, you're going to tell me what you did to her."

"I do not have to tell you anything, Nine Tails."

Naruto used his Shunshin to zip behind Danzo. He lashed out with a vicious kick, but it passed harmlessly through the man as he

disappeared. Naruto felt a presence behind him.

"Was that bastardized technique supposed to be a Shunshin?"

Naruto felt white hot pain rip through his back as a sharp blade cut from shoulder blade to hip. He tumbled forward and sprung to his feet. The demonic chakra already worked to close the shallow cut.

"Maybe."

"You use chakra to wrap around your body, and then launch yourself at a pre-selected area. It works quickly, and effectively masks you from a doujutsu, but you can only move in a relatively straight line."

Naruto grit his teeth. The bastard had dissected his technique perfectly just from using it once. No wonder he was considered on the same level as his Jiji. No doubt he'd be able to do the same with everything else he threw at him. What had him more concerned though was that Sharingan in his palm. With a useless right eye, wouldn't it have made more sense to put it there?

"Allow me to show you what a true Shunshin is, Nine Tails."

Danzo disappeared from view, and Naruto suddenly felt like he had been thrown in a blender. He could only capture glimpses of the man, or the flash of a blade that would make a shallow cut. Using his own Shunshin, he catapulted himself straight up in an attempt to get a clearer view. He saw stars as the pommel of the sword was slammed down on the top of his skull, and his body was sent crashing into the ground.

"Get up, Nine Tails. You have not learned your place yet."

Naruto struggled to pull himself up as his head pounded. His skull had definitely been cracked with that one. He looked up. Okay, what was he going to pull out of thin air to win the fight this time? He sucked in a deep breath and forced a little more chakra towards the

back of his head. First, he needed to heal, which was going to take a little longer.

"What do you mean my place?"

"Under foot of course." Danzo flicked the blood off his katana. "Where you have always belonged."

"Screw you!"

"Such vulgar language is not necessary. I have long sought for you to be under my control. From the day you became a Jinchuriki, I sought to have you enlisted in Root. Pushing your mother out of Konoha was one attempt at that. However, Sarutobi prevented my actions at every turn. I suppose he felt it was better for you to grow up a hated orphan."

"It's better than being your tool."

"How do you suppose that is the case? In exchange for your loyalty, you would have had the training to be a great ninja that would have been much more useful to the village than the pathetic genin you are now. You would have had comrades, teachers, and community."

"If being alone made sure that you didn't get your hands on the Kyubi's power, then I'm glad for my life."

"Your martyrdom is unneeded. The outcome will be the same. I will be Hokage, and the power of the fox will be at my disposal." Danzo brought the blade up and rested it in the crook of his elbow. "Now come, you are still a long way from the whipped dog you are required to be."

"Bite me, you murdering bastard!"

Naruto lunged forward as a hundred Kage Bunshin popped into existence. All of them pulled out kunai and flung them forward as they whipped through hand signs.

"Kunai Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The kunai became a nearly solid wall as they soared toward the old warmonger. He leapt again and sprung off his clones until he latched onto the cave ceiling with his chakra. The clones scattered along the floor. He'd make sure the bastard didn't have anywhere to go.

"Bunshin Daibakuha!"

The entire cave shook as multiple explosions chained together resulting in a single fireball that covered the entire bottom of the cave. His blue eyes darted around the cave floor as he tried to spot any movement. There wasn't any. The fires receded, and he dropped down onto the steaming ground. Many of the stones still glowed in a dull red from the heat of the attack.

"Futon: Shinkugyoku."

Naruto twisted as multiple bullets of compressed air shot at him. Many of them nicked at the already tattered remains of his favorite jacket. He flipped back as Danzo swung his sword at his neck. Naruto twisted on his hands and kicked as he balanced on one hand. He summoned a low powered Rasengan as quickly as he could and jabbed it forward. Danzo leapt back, and right into a Kage Bunshin that had materialized behind him. The clone drove a kunai deep through the traitor's heart.

The fossil erupted into a mass of blood as Naruto flipped to his feet. He panted heavily as the Bunshin disappeared into a puff of smoke. The hair stood up on the back of his neck and he spun… right into Danzo's downward slash.

Danzo's army marched with a proud step. They were unbeatable. The power of their seals solidified this thought as fact. They had destroyed Sunagakure. They had withstood the feared power of the Kazekage. Konoha was next, and the result would be the same. It would always be the same. Their march intensified, kicking up grainy

dust with every heavy step. They didn't care if it coated their noses and throats, if it made their eyes bloodshot. A little discomfort would not stop them.

Nothing would stop them.

Gaara grinned maliciously. It reminded him uncomfortably of his days as the crazed container of the One Tail. However, he would not deny the satisfaction he felt with each grain of sand inhaled by that approaching army. They had destroyed his home, slaughtered friends and family, and had made his people sad and destitute. The satisfaction he felt was cruel. There was no arguing that fact, but a great deal of it was a feeling of redemption. Never again would those corrupt shinobi harm another soul. He prayed that those already dead would forgive him for his past failure.

With that thought, his face became more serious and he raised his hands like a conductor signaling his orchestra they were ready to begin. Blood trickled from his nose slowly, the strain from the inhuman amount of control he was exerting taking a toll on his body. With eyes closed, his fingers snapped straight and his arms swung down decisively.

Jiraiya would later tell him that many people were curious as to how such a powerful army could disappear without a trace.

Naruto lay on his back with his mouth agape. The bastard had hit a lung that time. Even through the choking, he snarled as the man stood over him proudly. His clothes had been badly burned and the right sleeve was completely missing. Naruto wished it hadn't been.

Ten Sharingan dotted the appendage. Well… he assumed it was ten. Four spots looked like closed eyes. An idea fired in Naruto's head as Danzo prepared to stab down. Naruto ran his palm through the blade to deflect it from his body as he jumped to his feet. Like his fight with Kabuto, he gripped the man's hand through his sword. A Rasengan

formed in his left hand, and he went to slam it into the side of the war-hawk's face. A paper's width from contact, Naruto's hand suddenly stopped as something grabbed his forearm. His eyes widened. Was that Mokuton sticking out of the bastard's shoulder?

The wood twisted violently, and Naruto yelled out in pain as his arm was snapped backwards. Focusing through the pain, he willed another clone into existence behind his enemy. Danzo's eye cut to it and threw out a lightning fast side kick. The clone was obliterated instantly.

"Do you really think the same surprise tactic could work twice?"

"Let's see how well you keep up!"

Naruto summoned as many as he could. It was always difficult without both hands for seals, but he could do it with one if he had to. Twenty Bunshin puffed into existence and started to attack while the real one tried to hold Danzo in place. The two twisted and spun as the clones launched an offensive barrage. Naruto did his best to limit the old man's counters. Most of his attempts failed, but the ones that did looked like they would bother Danzo for a while.

He brought his knee up and caught Danzo square in the chin as two Bunshin's charged in with a Rasengan each. Danzo released his grip on the sword and rapidly went through three hands seals just before the attacks connected with his back. He burst into another wave of blood, and Naruto collapsed to his knees. The two clones grabbed his arms without a word. The one on his left reset the bones in that arm, while the one on the right simultaneously pulled out the sword. Naruto could only cry out and try to prevent himself from passing out.

"You are stubborn, Nine Tails." Danzo appeared in front of him. Although, the man was keeping a greater distance than before. "I will commend you on your abilities though. It really is a shame that you were not trained properly from the beginning. As the son of two powerful ninja, and the Jinchuriki of the Kyubi no Yoko, you would have been a fine weapon for Konoha."

"You mean you."

"There is no difference. I am what is best for Konoha. Serving me is no different than serving the village. It is irrelevant however. Whether from childhood or now, you will end up under my control."

Naruto clenched his teeth and tried to stand. If he tried, he could push out enough chakra to get a few tails. However, it wouldn't be long before Danzo would resume suppression of it. His eyes drifted down to the warmonger's arm. A fifth Sharingan had closed. It was as he thought. Each time he's killed, the bastard could replace himself with an eye or something like that. The time he used the Mokuton must have been because he couldn't do the eye thing.

He knew that he had landed two direct hits. So, the three other times must have been from the kunai and exploding Bunshin combo. That must mean that there was only a certain escape distance and time duration that the technique had, which meant that he needed a widespread and long lasting attack. The same combination wouldn't work twice… which meant he had to resort to the other thing.

"Let's put your Shunshin to the test, Danzo." Naruto ignored the screaming protest of his arms as he made the well practiced seal. "Think you can stop all of them?"

Nearly a thousand clones burst into existence. He knew they didn't have enough chakra for a Rasengan each, but they would buy him some time. The Bunshin went on the attack. They charged Danzo and bounced off the walls, secretly leaving behind his custom exploding tags. Naruto squeezed his eyes shut and summoned all of his will to pull the chakra from within the system to his body. One tail, two tails, three tails sprouted from his body. He felt his body begin to mend, but immediately felt something trying to push it down. Ignoring it, he fought with everything he had to keep the energy flowing for just a little longer.

His eyes snapped open as the damage was repaired enough to move. Danzo was busy attacking and avoiding his clones… good.

He stretched his palm out away from him, and took a calming breath. Why did it seem that he was always gambling on some new type of technique lately? A light blue glow of his chakra started to materialize.

"Now!" He shouted at his clones.

"Rodger!"

Danzo's eye widened as the entire cave was filled to the brim with searing flames as tag and clone alike exploded.

Naruto activated his technique to the fullest as the fire race towards him. He hoped that his idea would work and not cook him alive. Four Bunshin made a protective barrier around him as he raised his hand above him. The fire surged with an unbridled fury… as it was sucked into the technique. The blonde grasped his wrist as his arm shook from the strain.

"Shinku Rasengan."

The theory had been his own secret idea, and he barely had it past the experimental stage. The Rasengan was always spun in a particular direction. His, Jiraiya's, and he assumed his father's all rotated the same. However, in his training for the wind element, he had an idea. What if he reversed the rotation? Instead of the force being generated out, it was focused in. The result had been a unique attack. It was comparable to the power of his regular Rasengan. But instead of drilling outward, it seemed to almost… grind inward.

He had yet to accomplish adding his wind element to it, since it slipped out almost immediately upon entry. But, he'd noticed the dust particles had remained trapped within. So now, he had banked on the hope that the fire would at least be pulled away from him, even if it wasn't collected. It appeared to be doing so, to the point that even his clones were protected. The only question he had now was if he could survive the heat and lack of oxygen.

No, he had to. Once the fire was down, the air would come. This was his only chance to make sure that Danzo would never again threaten Konoha. He would handle the pain, the lack of chakra, the fatigue in his muscles. If he couldn't, then what the hell had Hinata died for? Everything that was gained and lost would mean nothing if he didn't have the guts to stick it out.

"The moment you see his body, point me in that direction," Naruto cried out to his clones.

They nodded as the fires subsided, except for the burning maelstrom above his head. It was still producing an unbearable heat, and Naruto couldn't see anything past the flames.

"There!" The Bunshin to his right pointed at a figure taking shape.

Naruto cried out as he swung his hand in that direction. The attack was like a spiraling star as it raced at the materializing Danzo. The blonde didn't wait to see what would happen. The remaining clones were dispelled, and he felt his chakra reserves get a pitiful boost. One shot was all he needed, just was one shot. He used every ounce of his willpower to run forward. His eyes never wavered from ahead of him. He never looked in awe as the flames subsided, and Danzo was being shielded by a charred tree emerging from his shoulder. He was not aware that his own shoes had melted off, or that the majority of his feet and upper body were nothing more than charred leather. All that he focused on was the man in front of him, and all that he did was run forward with his hand stretched out.

"Futon: Rasenshuriken!"

He flung the technique as hard as he could. Like a screaming buzz saw, the projectile closed the distance between them far faster than any launched so far. Naruto saw Danzo attempt to disengage the Mokuton defense, and he almost succeeded.

Almost was not enough.

The Rasenshuriken expanded and caught Danzo before the man could escape from the attack. The traitor cried out as an impossible number of micro wind blades cut through him. Naruto watched in both awe and caution as the attack destroyed everything caught within it. His arm dangled uselessly at his side. Jelly would have been more solid, he thought as he looked down at it.

The attack ended and he made his way over to the remains of Danzo. His adrenaline was plummeting and the pain reaching dangerous levels. What had started off as a slow walk had become a slow limping shuffle in only a few feet. He ignored his body and kept his eyes locked on Danzo. The bastard was broken and missing a fatal portion of himself, but Naruto had to make sure he was dead. There was no telling what the crafty war-hawk had up his sleeve.

"So, it is Hiruzen's philosophy that will win out in the end." Danzo's words came out more like a cough than solid language. He stared blankly at the ceiling, and Naruto wasn't sure who he was actually talking to.

"Come Nine Tails, why do you look so sour? Your revenge, your mission is complete."

"I don't enjoy killing people. Surprisingly, even power hungry bastards like you."

"Ah, that is respectable." Danzo turned to look at him. "I am still speaking. Why do you not cut me down?"

"I don't know what you have up your sleeve. You could try something like jump bodies."

"Don't be absurd. I would never abandon my principles just to live a little longer."

"You have principles?"

"Do not insult me, Nine Tails." Danzo's voice took on a surprising amount of strength. "I have always done what I felt was best for Konoha. For that, we are alike. However, it appears in the end, your resolve was stronger than my own. I will accept my defeat with dignity."

"I never pictured you with any honor."

"Honor is in the eye of the beholder. Honor, for a ninja like me, is doing everything and anything to make sure that what we hold dear remains standing. No mission is too immoral or dangerous if it would keep Konoha safe."

Naruto remained silent. This man was so firm in his beliefs it would be a waste of what precious energy he had to try and convince him otherwise.

"I wonder. Will you, with your soft ideals, be able to keep those walls standing? Even if you defeat my army, the Akatsuki is coming boy. Do you think friendship and forgiveness will stop them?"

"I guess we'll have to find out." Naruto stared down as his tired eyes shown with a quiet determination. "But you have one thing wrong."

"And that is?"

"I don't see Konoha as a bunch of walls and buildings. Konoha is the villagers. As long as they are safe, walls can be rebuilt and new homes can be found."

Danzo gave a weak laugh.

"Sarutobi said that exact same thing at one time."

Danzo reached up with his left arm and pulled down the bandage over his right eye. Naruto's body tensed as a diseased Sharingan locked onto his blue eyes. Suddenly, his head was bombarded with

images. Then it stopped just as suddenly. He looked down at Danzo as the old man placed the bandage back up.

"What did you-?"

"Your Shunshin is disgusting, and a mockery of everyone who ever used the technique. I merely used my Sharingan to teach you the proper method. You will also find I did the same with several of my wind techniques. After all, our kind is rare in Konoha."

"Why? Shouldn't you be trying to kill me?"

"I would only kill you if it benefited Konoha. Given the growing storm, it makes more sense to at least supply you with a means of surviving a little longer."

"… Thanks, I guess."

"Do not thank me. We are still enemies of philosophy. I just wish to die knowing that I did every last thing to aid my beloved Konoha, even if it will most likely prove futile."

Danzo turned his head away.

"Leave me now, Nine Tails. I wish to be at peace in my last moments."

Naruto didn't even have the energy to nod. He summoned a single weak looking clone. It picked him up and started heading towards the exit. His last vestiges of energy were used to keep his eyes open. Cause if his clone dispelled, he'd be left here with Danzo.

"He's quite a brat, eh Danzo?"

The war-hawk looked up to see a strange orange mask staring down at him.

"Who are you?"

"Just a collector." The mask knelt down closer. "Tell me Danzo, did you know the Sharingan speak to me?"

The old man's eye widened.

"Madara?"

"Your eye's been crying to me for a while now. I think now that you're done with it. I should take it home."

Danzo remained stoic as the darkness enveloped him… forever.

Pain glanced down at the deceased form of the Eight Tails' Jinchuriki. The container had been surprisingly powerful, and had an unbelievable amount of control of his Biju. Pain had been wise to keep his remaining bodies hidden, while the Deva endured the brunt of the fighting. It had tired out the target, and made it simple for the other bodies to end his struggling. Had it been just him, the fighting could have been significantly more even. No that wasn't true, if it had been a singular body, he would have lost.

His Rinnegan scanned at the other members hopping down from the fingers of the sealing statue. They would all rest for a few hours and then begin the final sealing of the Nine Tails. However, the sense of accomplishment was being overshadowed by something else. Madara had been strangely absent. Considering the importance of the event, and the desires of the man, it would seem he would be closer at hand. He didn't like the idea that the wily Uchiha was not under his eye. Despite their mutual goals, he was not so much a fool to let the Madara go ignored.

The Yondaime Raikage, E, stared out from his office window. His beloved brother had been captured by Akatsuki. A part of him berated himself. Konoha had warned of the growing threat, and he had ignored them. He had even failed at keeping a closer eye on Killer Bee. After Yugito's capture, he should have known better.

However, he was the ruler of Kumogakure, a nation of strength and pride. Assistance from other nations was something to be frowned upon. When he had heard of Danzo's exile, he ignored it as had most other countries. As far as the majority of the world was concerned, Akatsuki and Danzo were Konoha's problem. Kumo only needed to know enough about it to ensure its own security.

Although, now that his brother was captured, it indicated that Akatsuki had most, if not all, of the Biju. If Akatsuki did succeed, then that was the problem of the entire world. An excessive amount of pride was not needed at a time like this. Besides, if the other nations were involved it would make recovering his brother faster… and perhaps save him in time.

"Send out a letter to every Kage. It is time that we unite and deal with the Akatsuki." The Raikage turned to his secretary. "I also want Samui's team sent out after Killer Bee. We failed Yugito. The same will not happen with my brother!"

"I'm afraid that will not be necessary, Raikage."

E turned around in a flash to face the voice. A strange man with an orange mask sat calmly on his desk, as if being an intruder in the powerful Kage's was no different than walking into his own home. What caught his attention, however, was the black cloak with red clouds.

"Who are you to dare trespass in Kumo?"

"Just a messenger," Madara said with a wave of his hand.

E charged in a flash. His desk was smashed into splinters as his colossal fist connected with its hard surface. Madara calmly disappeared and reappeared out of harms way like smoke in the wind.

"What do you know of my brother?"

"He's dead."

"What?"

"The extraction process has been completed successfully. All of the Biju are now in my possession. There is nothing more that any of the elemental villages can do."

E clenched his fist and sparking electric energy coursed around him. His brother was… dead? Goofy, stupid, energetic Bee was dead? His eyes turned on the man before him, the man who taunted him so casually about their helpless state. No, they were careless, not helpless.

"Before you embarrass yourself further, perhaps you would like to listen to me." Madara sat on a bookshelf in the opposite side of the room. His hand folded over his knee like a grandfather telling a story.

"I'll give you thirty seconds."

"I see… very well, I request your cooperation."

"You kill my brother and expect me to help you?"

Madara's Sharingan shown through his mask as a dark chakra seeped into the air. E loathed to admit that it caused a split second of hesitation within him.

"Please don't interrupt. I only have thirty seconds, remember?" Madara caressed the chin of his mask as if he were in thought. "Now, I would like all of the villages help in destroying Konoha."

"What?"

"I wish to see that village wiped off the face of the planet. Comply and your own village will be spared."

"Powerful as you Akatsuki may be, you are still short in members. You have nothing to coerce us into doing anything of the sort."

"You forget. I now control all of the Biju. Under my power, you cannot seal them within a new container because they have already been sealed elsewhere. In short, there is nothing left that you can use to stand up to me."

"And who are you?"

"Madara Uchiha."

E's eyes widened a fraction. Madara was long supposed dead. Even if he was not, the man would be ancient. But then again, his current opponent was almost like a ghost. It would be foolish to dismiss anything prematurely.

"I can sense your doubt, but it makes no difference. Regardless, I control the demons and so much more. It is a simple choice no? Even if you were to go ahead with your pathetic little alliance, I can eliminate any one of you individually long before you meet. The forces of nature are at my command and your hands are tied. The only question that remains is do you submit… or die because of something as petty as pride?"

"How in the world is he still alive?" Jiraiya asked as he stared at his unconscious student from the door.

Naruto was heavily wrapped in bandages as numerous medic-nins chatted around him. His group had returned hours earlier. Shino and Shikamaru were hurt badly, but nothing that would not be fixed in time. The three elders were not so fortunate. Hinata, Lee, and the long missing Yugao were tired and battered, but ultimately fine. Hinata had been put in isolation under Tsunade's personal care until the extents of Danzo's manipulations were known. Yugao was likewise put under the care of Ibiki. She had a great deal to answer for.

His favorite blonde was an entirely different matter. Even though Hinata apparently had medical training, she was only able to keep

him from crashing. He was dying to know exactly what had occurred. Did Danzo do this? Was the bastard dead, or did they have to worry about another army being built? Honestly, he was perturbed that they had resorted to so much fighting. The mission was not supposed to be an assassination. The fact that there were only three casualties was a miracle. However, it was an unspoken rule to take out threats when the opportunity came. Perhaps, it was his own anger at not coming along… or believing that Danzo was really the cripple they thought him to be.

"He's too stupid to die," Tsunade said pulling him from his thoughts. She leaned against the door frame and followed his gaze. "That's really the only thought I have."

"You're kidding me right?"

"Eighty percent of his skin was literally charred. His right arm is shattered, for lack of a better term. While mostly healed, there are signs that he had incurred numerous other fractures during the fight. There is also the matter of his chakra exhaustion."

"Naruto, with chakra exhaustion?"

"Yes, to the point that his body itself was starting to shut down. His actual physical and spiritual energies were so depleted that they were no longer binding into chakra."

"Even with the reintroduction of the Kyubi's yin chakra?"

"That is part of my concern. Very little of that chakra has actually been used."

"So either he didn't use it… or couldn't."

"Exactly." She looked over at him. "Danzo must have had something up his sleeve. We should have known he would expect Naruto, of all people, to be a part of any rescue attempt, and he would have taken precautions against the demonic power."

"Probably true, however if what I think is true, Danzo was a greater threat than we had assumed. I'm thinking he killed Koharu and Homura."

"I agree. If he is dead, then that means Naruto is quickly reaching a level rivaling the strongest ninjas in the village."

"We've known that for a while."

"We knew he would reach that eventually, but I'm talking weeks or months, not years. Since his return, he has been in one constant battle against one S-rank missing-nin after another. It has accelerated his growth exponentially."

"That's normal though, ninja always grow faster in wartime than in peace."

"True, but what's even more amazing is that everyone is being carried by that growth. His teammates' strength has risen tremendously. Heck, even those who aren't around him have gotten caught up in the ripple effect. Did you know Kiba was in my office when they arrived at the gate? He could smell who it was and how injured they were, from halfway across the village, through thousands of other scents. The entire village seems to be caught up in Naruto's wake, and it is causing more and more ninja to reach heights that used to be reserved for the elite."

"That is a vital component of any Kage."

"I agree, and I'm not saying it is a bad thing. However, where he is right now is a symptom of that." She looked back in the room. "There is a difference between fighting a great deal, like in war, and fighting superior opponents that constantly damage him. He is sixteen with a body that is still developing. Putting strain on it like what is occurring right now can have lasting consequences."

"You're saying it may limit his growth in the future." Jiraiya nodded in understanding. "I get what you're saying Hime, I do. But, I'm curious

as to why you're bringing this up now. You've been pretty content with his pace up to now."

She sighed and turned to him. It almost caught him off guard with how serious her hazel eyes were. She didn't look like that often. Angry, mischievous, melancholy, all those were normally mixed in. However, pure seriousness was rare.

"From what I've seen, most of this damage came from him."

"What do you mean?"

"His arm gave it away. The bones were broken from rapid, successive, and repeated usage of techniques that it physically could not handle. Simply put, he was demanding more from his arm than it was capable of providing."

Jiraiya frowned and gave a quick glance at the blonde. It figures he would do something like that. The blonde had a knack for tweaking techniques, and even building upon them. Things like the Odama Rasengan were a perfect example of such creativity. The problem was that Naruto did get ahead of himself. He would work to perfect the technique itself, but not how he handled it. It was one of the aspects he still needed work on.

It also didn't help that his student had a one track mind that was stuck on forward. His student was far less reckless than in the past, and charged in with at least some thought as to what was going on. However, he was still too willing to take damage if it meant getting a hit in. Granted, at the level he was fighting at, it was almost a necessity, and it wasn't exactly like he needed to worry about recovering. Super healing took a lot of worry out of the equation. For most, a broken arm put them out for a month and then another few weeks of light training. He'd be up and in perfect health in less than a week.

"I guess I don't have a choice then." Jiraiya grinned. "We'll just have to make him stronger so that won't be a problem."

Tsunade blinked in disbelief before it morphed into a scowl.

"This isn't a joke Jiraiya. I can't risk losing my successor because it's easy to just throw him at a strong opponent."

"Your successor, huh?"

He gave her a grin. She'd let too much slip. Her face fell slightly as she realized what she had said. A small embarrassed blush crept up on her cheeks. She turned away in a huff.

"It's not like it was that big of a secret."

"I know, Hime. I wasn't joking though. I've got an idea that would help him."

"What?"

"We make him into a sage."

"-elp me… -ruto."

Naruto opened his eyes in a sea of black

"P me."

"Who's there?" Naruto called out.

"Na… ruto co- or me."

"I can't hear you. Who are you?"

"C-me fo- me."

"Speak up!"

A lone silted eye appeared in the black and threatened to consume him.

"Come for me, Naruto Uzumaki!"

Tsunade stepped into Hinata's room quietly as the girl sat on the bed. Her knees were tucked up against her chest, and her head rested upon them. The Hokage gave a sad smile. The girl was taking the entire incident hard. Hinata never did well when others suffered for her benefit, even if she would do the same in their shoes. The girl was simply too kind. There was also the entire issue with her physical changes.

"How is everyone doing, Tsunade-sensei?" Hinata asked without lifting her head up.

"They're doing fine. Shikamaru keeps grumbling about looking like a mummy, and Shino is more concerned with validating Yugao's assistance."

"And… Naruto?"

"He's beat up, as usual. Don't worry. The fox's chakra will have him up and going again in days… causing me problems of course."

Hinata gave a muffled chuckle and Tsunade moved closer.

"I received the full report of the tests that were run on you."

She noticed Hinata tense and suck in her breath.

"The results… were not favorable… were they Sensei?"

"No, well not in how you were hoping."

"So, it is true. Danzo's treatment manipulated me on a genetic level. It- it made m- me like-."

"Yes… your body is now very similar to how Orochimaru's was."

The ex-Hyuga clutched at the fabric of her hospital gown. Her shoulders shook, but any sounds were covered up by her knees. Tsunade tried her best to keep up a professional front, but her heart ached for the girl.

"Wh- what a- are the… what c- can I expe- pect?"

"You will have a significant increase in your ability to heal. The fact that Naruto's Rasengan was able to… kill you was simply because it damaged you faster than you could rejuvenate. I'm not sure if it is as advanced as Orochimaru's, because I do not know to what degree his repertoire of forbidden jutsu came into effect."

"What else?"

"Your flexibility is far beyond human limits. We could probably tie you in knot, and you would still retain all of your strength even in such a position." Tsunade gave a weak smile and summoned the last bit of her poise. "Your system is still acclimating to the changes, but I don't think we have to worry about you gaining a long tongue and exploding into snakes."

"You're stalling." Hinata looked up as her eyes started to water. "These changes are permanent aren't they? The white skin and snake like eyes won't go away will they?"

"No."

Hinata kept looking at her unflinching even as soft tears streamed from the edges.

"Will it hinder my eyes or other abilities?"

"No."

"Okay."

"Hinata-."

"May I rest now Sensei?" Hinata lay down on the bed and turned away. "It has been a long couple of days."

"Of course, Hinata."

Shikamaru frowned as Temari held her sides and laughed so hard she nearly collapsed on the ground. He couldn't completely blame her. He looked like a mummy with a black pineapple sticking out the top of its head. But still, she could show at least a little sympathy for him. Granted, it was his fault for using such a Naruto like move, but it was honestly his only shot at making sure he won.

Winning… it was something that he had never concerned himself with. It was easier, and certainly more enjoyable, to take it easy and avoid any form of competition. However, with his upcoming responsibility, he felt a new need to get stronger. Seeing the people of Suna made him want to climb higher… to fight. It was a pain though, that was for sure.

He leaned back as Temari tried to wipe the tears away from her eyes. His lazy days were behind him it seemed. This mission had validated his suspicions, and cemented his path in place. Yep, Naruto was going to need an advisor for a long time to come.

"Ne, nephew-chan, you dead yet?" Shinji said as he leaned on the windowsill to Shino's room.

"Does it look like I am no longer living, Uncle?"

"Never sure with you." Shinji pushed the reed of grass to the other side of his mouth. "You beat that guy I hear."

"I am not proud of how the battle went. My control is… lacking."

"You ready to get back to work then."

"Yes."

Pain strode into his private chambers at the top of the Amegakure tower. He had felt Madara's presence from below. It was not difficult to figure out the man wanted to talk. He never did reveal himself unless he wanted to discuss something. Pain's eyes looked over at the man in thought.

Madara sat on the table. His lone was eye staring down at a jar of collected Sharingan, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Pain knew better. The Uchiha was never lost in anything. He was silent as he moved closer. The sight of so many Sharingan would be disturbing to anyone else. How they were piled on top of each other like colored marbles in a container. Some were regular, but many were unique Mangekyo styled. It brought to question just why so many had gathered here.

"I want you to go to Konoha," Madara said without looking up. "You'll no doubt take Konan, but take Hidan along as well. He's been getting anxious being cooped up in here sealing."

"We are about to begin the sealing of the Nine Tails. Konoha can wait."

"So you wish for them to stop us?"

"That is an absurd accusation."

"Now that the threat Danzo posed has been neutralized, their full attention will be on us. The other elemental nations will follow suit."

"They will not make it in time."

"Perhaps you misunderstand." Madara looked up. "The Nine Tails' Jinchuriki is still alive. I want you to go to Konoha to find out why."

Pain remained expressionless even as a small feeling of surprise washed over him. The child being alive should be impossible. Then again, the extraction had been unexpected. Had something gone wrong?

"You believe that there is a chance the Kyubi was not fully extracted?"

"Yes, we may have only received its chakra, which is worthless. We must have the beast's soul." Madara stood to his full height. "I would go myself, but currently lack the power to bring him here if the need arose."

"Understood. I shall investigate. You will begin the extraction in the mean time, yes?"

"That would be for the best I believe."

"Agreed." Pain turned to leave but paused. "Madara our goals are similar. For that, I have a degree of trust in you."

He glanced over his shoulder and brought the full fury of the Rinnegan into focus.

"Do not betray me, lest you know pain."

Madara nodded silently not bothered by the threat in the least. He turned back to the jar and reached down as Pain walked out. He plucked one of the Mangekyo from the container as he removed his mask. Then, he popped it into his mouth… and bit down.

Naruto pushed his way into his apartment. Whatever dream he had had woke him out of his little coma. To say he was surprised to be in the Konoha hospital was an understatement. It had seemed just like moments before he was being carried out of Danzo's base. He was probably going to be in trouble for leaving the hospital in his condition, but he wanted to check on Hinata and make sure she was

okay. His skin was healing by the second anyway and he could feel the bones being repaired even faster.

A nights rest and he would be back to one hundred percent. Of course, Baa-chan would probably beat him into worse shape and send him back, but at least he would know if Hinata was okay. His last thoughts before unconsciousness had been of his Bunshin, and needless to say, he couldn't have been more happy.

He looked around silently. Was she already in bed? It was kind of late. A sound from her room drew his attention, and he quickly made his way over to her closed door. He could hear someone shuffling around inside. With a gentle knock, he called out to her. A moment of silence followed, and he knocked again. For a moment, he worried that she wouldn't open the door. Was she mad at him for…. yeah there was a list of things she could be mad at.

He was jerked from his thoughts as she cracked open her door. Her head was bowed down so he could only see the top of her head… and the abnormally white hand trying to hide behind the door. His eyes drifted into her room. A pack was open, and clothes were haphazardly stuffed into it. Oh hell no.

"Hinata, come out and talk to me."

"Ca- can it wait, Naruto-kun?"

"From the looks of things, you won't be here in the morning, so no."

He saw her cringe.

"I'm sorry Naruto-kun. I just don't want to talk right now."

"Look if you're pissed at me for, you know, killing you or kissing you or whatever other stupid thing I did, I'm sorry. I don't blame you at all so let me have it. Just talk to me, don't… don't ignore me, please."

That last part came out a little more pathetic than he had wanted it to. But it was true. Ignoring him would be the worst thing she could do to him. He'd rather have her try to kill him.

"I'm sorry, I can't." She went to shut the door, but he grabbed it with his hand.

"No."

"Naruto-kun please." She tried to push harder, but he held firm.

"We're going to talk."

"Go away!"

He scowled and pushed the door so hard it almost tore the hinges off the frame. His heart was pounding as he stepped in, and she backed up. A deep sense of terror was surging through his veins. She was afraid of him, or something else. Whatever it was, she was trying to shut him out. It was selfish of him, but he would be damned if he lost her twice. He wouldn't lose someone who he finally… who finally…

"Get out!" She backed up further as she tried to curl up and hide herself. "Please, just leave me alone."

He stepped forward and made sure she couldn't escape.

"Not until you talk to me. Stop acting so weird and just get it off your chest!"

"I don't… I can't."

"Will you look at me!"

He had meant it to be authoritative and strong, rather than angry and desperate. However, when she looked up in a mixture of shock and tears, his breath caught in his throat. She was so pale… and those dark purple snake like eyes hid just below the surface of her regular

lavender ones. So… the seal hadn't been responsible. He'd guessed that was the case, but hoped that he was wrong.

He wasn't that concerned with that though. What caused his gut to wrench and his eyes to water was the overpowering emotion swimming in her eyes. They were screaming a billion things at once, with more intensity than one person should ever be able to feel.

"I didn't- didn't want you to see me… this."

"Why?" He asked softly. "Why would you hide yourself?"

"Look at me. I look just like him."

"Not really, a relative or child maybe, but you're much cuter than Orochi-."

"Don't say his name! Just… I can't stand what you might think… that we're…"

"Hinata… it's not-."

"It's not what Naruto? A big deal… noticeable?" She gestured her arms wide. "Even if my face and shape are the same, people won't see that. They see the white skin and eyes of a traitor… of a sick man. I've become that person Naruto!"

"No you haven't!" Naruto bent over so that she would look at him. "Unless you develop a fetish for small boys and Sharingan, you are nothing like him!"

"Nothing like him? Nothing like him! You don't understand!" She stared up at him and clutched her chest. "I don't just look like him. I feel like him! Inside me… I feel cold, and like I want to hunt something down. Every single motion makes me feel like I'm slithering…. hunting. I feel disgusting! Like I don't even belong in this body. I'm a- a fr-."

"Don't say it." Naruto looked down at her as he struggled to hold back tears. "You're not, so don't you dare say it!"

"I'm a freak!" She screamed out as her entire body shook. She didn't bother to not cry, or keep her voice down as her emotions radiated off of her like a strong tide. "Tsunade says my body is still changing, and we don't know when it will stop! My body could become nothing more than some type of inhuman corpse. I could end up being the same compilation of snakes that Orochimaru was! I'm a monster, Naruto!"

She collapsed onto her knees as her strength left her with that last sentence. Gone was the strong kunoichi that had sacrificed herself for her family. In its place was something more human. She was a girl that felt as if everything was going to be torn away from her. It wasn't the change to the body that upset her. It was the horror of thinking other people wouldn't see her anymore. They would see something else… something they hated.

He understood that feeling. To be so ignored it was like you didn't exist. If someone hates you and tries to hurt you, they still acknowledge you exist. But if they never looked at you, never responded to you it was much crueler. Nothing was worse than the feeling of being left by yourself in the dark as you watched life playing by you like a movie. It was how he had spent his entire early life. Never would he allow someone to feel that way.

Summoning some of the Kyubi's chakra, he knelt down by her and grasped her chin, making sure not to scratch her with his growing claws.

"Hinata, am I a monster?"

She locked on to his demonic eyes. Her eyes swelled alarm and then melted into sadness.

"No, Naruto-kun… you could never be a monster."

"Right now, are our eyes the same?"

"… Yes."

"Look at me closely, Hinata. I'm different than everyone else. I have something in me that people may find disgusting just like you do. Am I a freak?"

She sniffed and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Am I a freak?"

"No."

"Well if I'm not a freak than neither are you. If you do turn out to be a freak, then so am I. From now on, whatever one is so is the other. So it doesn't matter what we are or become. We're the same."

"Bu- but-."

"Hinata, I'm… I'm happiest when I'm around you. Can you no longer make me happy as you are now?"

She clenched his T-shirt like she was afraid he was going to escape as she shook her head furiously.

"Can I do the same for you? Can I make you happy?"

"Ye- yes Naruto."

"I want you to always be standing with me." His own emotions poured out of him to the point he wasn't entirely sure what he was saying. "Will you do that? Will you let me do the same with you?"

"Yes," she sobbed as she pulled herself in. "I don't want to be away from you. I always want to be with you, Naruto-kun."

He wrapped his arms around her and crushed her against his chest.

"Then, we'll stay together regardless of what people think. Who gives a damn about the rest of the world?"

Author's Notes:

Well here it was, the fight and conclusion of this arc. Let me know what you think.

I'm going to nip any complaints about what happened with Hinata in the bud. Keep in mind, I never do anything just for the sake of adding drama. It serves a purpose for character growth. In this case, it will cement Hinata and Naruto's relationship in place far more than just knowing about his past. After all, knowing and understanding is very different. Besides, she'll be a lot stronger for this, both in body and spirit. You'll see.

Not much more to get into. We have a little over two feet of snow outside so I want to go out and train. Got a few six hundred pages to edit on another story as well. Doesn't really leave a lot of thought for ranting.

See you next week.

Breeze

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 21:

Madara stood proudly at the top of the sealing statue. His plans had fallen by the wayside with the deaths of Sasuke and Itachi. His Akatsuki was all but eliminated. The Jinchuriki of the Nine Tails was alive and held demonic power, albeit lacking the beast's spirit. In all, nothing had worked out as he expected. However, he had ultimately succeeded. Despite the hindrances, setbacks, and losses, he now controlled the means to resurrect the Jubi, and grasp its power for himself.

Luckily, the transference of the Kyubi was simple enough he could handle it quickly alone. It would make it much easier for his purposes as such. Trying to deal with Pain would have been difficult. He was indeed fortunate the man was too willing to listen to his counsel. Poor little Ame orphan, he and his lover would be destroyed by the very power they gathered. Being a bearer of the Rinnegan, it was far too dangerous to let Pain live. No… he would cripple Konoha badly in his search for Naruto. Then, it seemed fitting to him that the Kyubi eradicated what remained.

His attention was brought back to the statue. He could not be stopped. The Raikage's little alliance was impotent without any Jinchuriki. The little ninja would squirm and spit, but in the end, it would be a fruitless endeavor. He, Madara Uchiha, would hold absolute power. And when the villages fell, and nations dissolved, he alone would be the immortal ruler. After lifetimes and generations, the Uchiha name would finally be all that remained.

"Comfy?"

A chilling voice called out in an eerily sweet tone, the kind of tone that was a lie. It was a lie that evicted a feeling of fear within the soul, a deep instinctual need to run, to run as fast and as far as possible, even though deep down, every fiber of being knew that it was hopeless. To that end, Hinata and Naruto could only pull each other closer as Tsunade stood at the foot of the bed they shared. The pleasant smile negated by the angry vein on her forehead, and the closed eyelids hiding hazel orbs of pure rage.

"Now Baa-chan, this isn't as bad as it looks. We're fully clothed," Naruto said weakly.

"I don't care what you two do in your spare time." Her eyes snapped open, and she settled a burning glare upon them. "Who gave either of you permission to leave the hospital? I sure as hell didn't, and with both your conditions that is the only permission you should be concerned about."

"Tsunade-sensei, I-."

"Don't you give me that quiet girl tone, Hinata. I'd expect Naruto to do something like this, but as a trained medic, I would think you'd know better."

"I'm sorry, Sensei."

"Oh, sorry comes after what I'm going to do to the both of you."

Jiraiya stepped into the room as he slurped at a cup of instant ramen. The old man raised an eyebrow as he looked at the two teens cowering together under the sheets. He swallowed the noodles down and broke into a large grin.

"Nice gaki."

Naruto's eyes narrowed. He'd had just about enough of that. He twisted his fingers into the ram seal and transformed in a puff of smoke. A gorgeous female version of him appeared, and she pushed her cheek against Hinata's.

"Save us from Baa-chan, Ero-sensei."

Jiraiya blinked for a moment before his head was snapped back in a gush of blood. Naruto dropped the technique, ignoring Hinata who now had full color back in her face plus some. He jumped up and pointed an accusing finger at the dazed man lying on his floor.

"I'm not going to say it again, Ero-sensei." Naruto clenched his fist. "And stay the hell away from my ramen! I only share it with Hinata!"

"Is that what you call it, gaki?"

Naruto twitched.

"Minato-kun… is that?" Kushina asked as they walked down the dusty trail.

"Yes… that is the Kyubi's yin chakra."

"How can we feel it so far from the village? We're several miles out."

"I don't know… wait, it vanished?"

Naruto pouted as he nursed the large welt on the top of his head. Hinata sat next to him in some kind of coma of embarrassment. Stupid Ero-sensei picking on him. Mean Baa-chan hitting him. His attention was pulled from his thoughts as Tsunade sighed. Hinata seemed to recognize that sigh as well. Their leader always did that when she was ready to get to business.

"I did not have a chance to commend you on your success in your mission, Naruto. I also must say how impressed I am that you managed to deal with Danzo as well."

"It was nothing, Baa-chan." Naruto scratched the back of his head as a nervous blush tinted his cheeks. "I was more than happy to beat that bastard down."

"Yes, and I will expect the full report on my desk soon."

"Re-report?"

"Welcome to chunin, brat." Her grin died. "That being said, Danzo had you beat didn't he?"

Naruto flinched and looked down at the ground quietly. Hinata glanced over at him with a confused, but concerned, expression.

"He repressed the Kyubi chakra. I had to rely on my custom exploding tags… and several jutsu that I haven't perfected yet."

"I'm sure that with a little more practice you will fix that. However, that does not change the fact that you are now handling techniques that are frankly beyond your current ability."

Naruto's head snapped up.

"Now hold on a minute Baa-chan-."

"Your own attacks did more damage to you than any of Danzo's did, am I correct?"

His jaw tensed as he nearly bit out an argument. However, he held it back. She was right, as much as he hated to admit it. It wasn't the reliability of his jutsu in question, or his understanding and strategy in using them. He could not argue that his back had been up against the wall, and his plans were all last ditch efforts. Danzo had outclassed him plain and simple. The only reason why he won was

because he could take an insane amount of damage… and had no problem sacrificing himself in order to win.

"Yes, you are."

"Good to see you admit your limitations." She glanced over at Jiraiya who was picking himself up. "You are to return to your training with Jiraiya tomorrow."

"What?" Naruto scowled. "We don't have time to waste on another three year training trip!"

"Then I suggest you master the curriculum. This training will be so that you can learn a rare and prestigious art. How fast you manage to perfect it will be entirely up to you." Tsunade turned to Hinata. "I have also arranged for you to meet with a teacher as well. I know many of your techniques are still in development. Combined with your new eyes and body, you are well under your potential."

Naruto saw her wince when her body was mentioned. He discreetly reached over and snatched up her hand. It wasn't like she needed it. She could handle anything thrown at her, but he wanted to do something nice for her. He smiled when she squeezed his hand back.

"You are correct Tsunade-sensei." Hinata looked up as her eyes filled with their usual determination. "As much as I hate what has happened to me, I can feel it has the potential to push me to unforeseen levels. I- I'll have to learn to deal with it."

"Good. Report to my office tomorrow morning. I will direct you to where you will be training."

"Yes, Tsunade-sensei."

"Alright, now that that is settled, you two have the rest of the day to do as you wish. I'm going to find the rest of your godforsaken team. I swear putting all of you together was a mistake." She turned to walk

out as she grabbed Jiraiya and started dragging him behind her. "Every last one of you seems intent on driving me nuts."

Naruto heard the door shut and glanced at Hinata.

"So… want to go get some Ichiraku's?"

Kushina tried to keep a composed persona as she walked through the streets of Konoha. It seemed foreign but nostalgic all at the same time. A thousand what ifs and wishful scenarios flooded her mind. But through them all, the one repeating thought was that she should have experienced it with her son. When she walked by the academy, she pictured him running out to her after his first day. When she walked around a familiar corner, she imagined how she would no doubt have been chasing him down for his mischief.

What did he look like now? It had been so long since she had seen a picture. Was he one of those awkward looking teens, or was he the village heartthrob? What was he like? What she had heard before painted him as a mirror image of her personality. He was a brash kid with more guts than brains, and a terror to teach. Although, he apparently had Minato's unrelenting determination, which was a blessing considering he lacked her natural talent… and phenomenal teachers.

Minato paused in front of a stand she knew well. The modest shop of a man who was nothing less than a ramen making god. She gave him a questioning look. There would be time for ramen later. He gave a nod in the same direction. When her eyes followed his gaze, she became immensely grateful they were hidden amongst the crowd in their cloaks. For a moment, she felt a wave of anxiety overcome her. There was no mistaking that bright blonde hair, or those mirthful blue eyes. The ones she had wanted to see in person for so long.

He seemed to be so carefree and was going out of his way to make the girl with him laugh. The girl appeared to be very uncomfortable,

though not with her son. It was obvious she was more than happy to be with him. It was something different, which was probably why she was using the Henge technique.

"Who's that with him?" Kushina asked.

"Hinata, his teammate."

"Are they a couple?"

"From what I was told by Sensei, it is a work in progress, as he put it."

"I'm going to have to thank him. We'd know absolutely nothing about our son if your teacher hadn't spent two days telling you about him."

"You had best clarify how to thank him." Minato gave a tight grin. "Knowing Sensei, he'd think it was an open invitation to spy on you in the bathhouse."

"Damn pervert." Kushina felt an embarrassing blush creep up on her cheeks. "I still can't believe he managed to peep on me that one time."

Minato chuckled nervously as Naruto and Hinata stepped into the shop. He made a quick hand seal, and their cloaks wrapped themselves up in a single scroll. He pocketed it under his coat. Kushina slapped the sides of her face and marched up to the front of the shop. Sucking in a deep breath, she pushed the flap hanging in front of her face to the side.

"Old man, one salt ramen with the works!"

Teuchi's head snapped around like an explosion had occurred behind him. His eyes lit up and a strange smile crept across his face. He took a tentative step forward.

"Kushina-chan is… is that you."

"I'm home, old man."

Teuchi sniffed.

"That you are." He glanced down at a perplexed Naruto. "Naruto, this person was the only one that had a bigger tab than you. Between the two of you… I… I can retire within the year!"

"Like hell old man!" Kushina and Naruto chorused.

The two looked at each other in surprise. However, Naruto's face quickly scrunched up as he scrutinized her. Kushina momentarily felt all her confidence slip away, and she struggled to keep the urge to hug him down. He was just so damn adorable to her, like a mini-Minato.

"Who are you?" Naruto sat back on his stool. "Some old friend of the old man? I've never seen you here so it must have been a long time ago."

"Something like that."

Naruto continued on seemingly lost in the tide of his thoughts.

"A really long time."

Kushina forced a smile to her face.

"Are you insinuating that I'm old?"

"What?" Naruto's head snapped up. He quickly waved his hands defensively. "No, not at all, I mean you're not exactly young, but I just-."

Kushina grabbed his cheeks and started to stretch them out cruelly.

"I'm freaking young and beautiful you brat! I dare you to say otherwise. Come on, say it you little jackass!"

Naruto gave some sort of muffled apology. What exactly was said was unclear, but the tone itself spoke volumes. Hinata just sat quietly in the corner as she ordered her ramen. Teuchi took it happily, as if seemingly unaffected by the violence in front of him. Kushina gave a victorious smile and turned her attention to Hinata.

"Hey you, with the Henge, drop it." Kushina moved over to the girl so swiftly, Naruto thought for a minute that she was still in front of him. "I don't like not knowing a persons face."

Kushina noticed the younger girl tense up. What could have had the girl so worked up that she needed to hide it? It couldn't be that she thought she was ugly could it? It wasn't like that Henge could stand up in combat.

"Leave her alone lady." Naruto pushed himself off the stool. "Hinata doesn't need you picking on her right now."

"You can stand up for yourself right?" Kushina never took her eyes off the girl. "Or are you the type of kunoichi that hides behind someone stronger?"

"Hey, Hinata's plenty strong. She just doesn't need to waste time on a jerk like you!"

"Then, why is she hiding behind that technique."

"Miss, I recently had something happen to me, and I am not yet willing to reveal it to the village." Hinata turned to her fully with a calm expression. "I just want to appreciate my meal in peace after several trying days."

Kushina fought the urge to smile. This girl was not half bad. Those eyes radiated a certain gentleness, but there wasn't a shred of doubt about the kid's strength. Her son had done well. However, she knew from years of experience that facing something earlier on made it much easier than hiding it. She probably didn't have any right butting in, but hey, it had never stopped her in the past.

"Sorry cutie, but I'm pretty stubborn."

Kushina gave a swipe with her hand and the technique dispelled. The girl's face didn't change a bit, but her skin grew deathly pale and her eyes became… oh, that was why. Now, she understood completely. However, it didn't change that her revealing it now was for the best… at least among family. She saw Naruto's face darken. Yeah, she was a pushy bitch. She knew it. Hot of head as she was of body, that was what many people had used to describe her. Still, she liked how the girl didn't flinch or look away. Yes… she liked this girl a lot.

"Are you satisfied now, Miss?" Hinata asked. "As you can see, my looks might evict certain opinions from the village."

"Yeah." Kushina snatched the girl up into a bone crunching hug. "You're just so damn precious!"

Naruto and Hinata blinked in disbelief as she started chattering away about how beautiful and strong the younger girl was. Naruto turned as Minato walked in and took a seat a couple of stools down. As always, he was in the best calculated spot. Close enough to Naruto to talk easily, but far enough away not to seem smothering.

"As you can see Naruto, she has all the delicacy of an explosion in a store full of fine glass." Minato gave an uncomfortable grin. "She's a lot like you from what I hear, or maybe, it is more accurate to say you are a lot like her."

Kushina cracked an eye as she continued to smother the beat red girl. Her son's eyes widened, and he turned to look at her fully. She gave him a big toothy grin.

"So can I make a first impression or what?"

Jiraiya walked alongside Tsunade as his eyes absently roamed around. They had been going around checking up on Naruto's

teammates and issuing orders. Well, Tsunade had been checking up and giving orders. He was just following her around because he was bored. There wasn't enough time to investigate Akatsuki's activities due to his leaving with Naruto. Sure, Pa and Ma didn't really need his help in training, but if there was a chance he could help speed up Naruto's mastery of it, then he couldn't risk not being there. He was the most familiar with Naruto and his quirks. That left pestering Tsunade or prowling the bathhouses, and he honestly didn't feel like doing research today.

"Stop it," Tsunade said without turning to face him. "You're making me nervous."

"Huh, why?"

"You're looking all over the village, but not at any of the women. You only do that when either you're leaving for a long time… or you're worried about something."

"Really, I've never noticed."

"You did it even back when we were genin. The same as sensei always did."

"Back when we were genin eh? Seems like a lifetime ago."

"More like ten lifetimes, and you are avoiding the question." She turned her head toward him. "As your Hokage, I demand you answer me."

Jiraiya threw his head back and laughed. Tsunade frowned, but he could tell she was fighting back a chuckle.

"Sorry Hime." Jiraiya wiped a tear from his eye. "You just sounded so serious there for a moment."

"I was serious… fool."

"If you say so." Jiraiya sighed. "Naruto is going to pick up this training pretty quickly."

"That concerns you?"

"No, not at all, but once he has it someone has to track down Akatsuki. I've got a suspicion where they are, but I don't want to say until I know for sure."

"With as powerful as they are, it's stupid to try and go alone."

"Yeah, but sending an army into a country without evidence isn't smart either."

"True. However, I don't want to risk you getting killed."

Jiraiya looked at her. Surprise etched in his features. She had never said anything remotely similar to that before. His lips curved up in a genuinely happy smile.

"Wow Hime, keep talking like that and a guy might get the wrong idea."

"Jiraiya… you're the last person close to me." She looked off in the distance. "It wouldn't seem right without you around."

His smile mellowed into something more grateful and content.

"That means a lot coming from you, I mean it." Jiraiya started walking forward again. "Don't worry, I should be okay."

"But if you're not, you contact me immediately. Your travel toads can get me there in no time at all."

"You're needed here, Tsunade."

"We have Minato now. He's a better Hokage any day of the week."

"He's got enough to work out right now. You leave him alone until he comes to you."

"But-."

"Tell you what." Jiraiya spun around. "You give me something to come back for."

"Wha- what?" Tsunade blushed as he leaned in closer with a mischievous grin.

"Yep, you've got to promise me that you'll become my wife if I return safe and sound."

Tsunade's mouth dropped, and he had to bite back the chuckle he had building up in his chest. He was joking… mostly. She had given him a golden opportunity to mention something like that, and he would have been an idiot not to bring it up. However, he was surprised as her awe struck face twisted up into her familiar condescending grin.

"Sure, why not."

Silence had been the last thing he had been expecting when his wife and son met. He imagined there would be shouting… a lot of shouting. It probably would have gotten pretty angry, and maybe a little violent. He'd packed some restraining scrolls just to be safe. With as stubborn as they were, Kushina would have kept pushing and Naruto would have become more resistant.

What he had not been expecting was for Naruto to quietly turn and order his ramen, or for Kushina not to demand his attention, and instead sit right between them and order her own. The impromptu ramen eating competition was a little more understandable, as well as the occasional defiant glare they would toss at each other. They seemed to be content in their own little world of ramen and quest for victory.

"Old man, another one!" The two gluttons called out simultaneously.

They turned to each other with scowls, and Minato could have sworn he saw electricity spark between them. He looked at the bowls that lined the counter. They were on their third bowl each, while he and Hinata were working on their second. It was good to see the girl had a healthy appetite. Such a thing was a symptom of intense and continuous training.

The ramen chef seemed to have an added skip in his step as he set the bowls down in front of them. Minato figured this was heaven for him. Kushina had been a high paying regular when he was just starting out. Well more than a regular, she was the reason why he stayed open his first few years. It was odd for her to go more than a day without at least one bowl from his stand. Even though she had started cooking for them, she always managed to sneak a bowl somehow.

Minato picked up his bowl and moved over to the other side of Hinata. She seemed to be keeping to herself, although she would let out the occasional giggle when she glanced at the two competitors. As embarrassed as she had been by Kushina's lavishing, he could tell she appreciated the unflinching acceptance of her appearance. The fact that Kushina had a childlike adoration of cute or pretty things, and her forward behavior, simply added to the effect.

"Since you seem to be the only sane one here, you mind if I sit by you?" Minato asked as he sat down. She nodded. "You can be my shield if they get into a food fight."

He flashed a kind grin, and she nodded her head as a similar smile appeared on her face.

"I apologize if Kushina made too strong of a first impression. I'm sure you noticed those two are a lot alike."

"Yes, but it is okay. I can tell she meant well by it. I suppose hiding what has happened to me will not make things easier." She glanced

over at Naruto. "With Naruto-kun's unwavering support, it doesn't really matter what others think anyway."

"A very mature way of thinking about it. I wouldn't worry about that though. People will be able to see past your changes given time. So don't get discouraged if you run into some that give you a hassle at first."

"Thank you, I will, Yondaime-sama."

"Another bowl, old man!" The chorus repeated.

"It's just Minato, Hinata-san."

"Okay." She cast another glance at the two, who were slowing down quickly. "They're going to get sick aren't they, Minato-san?"

"Yep."

"They make life very interesting don't they, Minato-san?"

"Yep."

Hiashi watched from afar with his Byakugan as a pang of regret echoed in his chest. His eldest daughter and her three companions eating together stirred a small sense of longing within him. Despite her recent troubles and the underlying tension that hung over them all, there was word that came to mind… family. They looked like a family. Hinata being the source of calm to Naruto, as Minato was to Kushina. The more relaxed she became around the Yondaime, the more he could see her true self surfacing. It was the same confident girl that had defeated him and saved the clan. Yet, he saw something else that he was ashamed to say he never had seen before.

She was happy. The one thing she never was in the compound… or around him.

He shook his head and folded his hands in his robes as he turned around. Regret was not something that he deserved to feel. He had not yet done anything to atone for his treatment of her. His vigil was merely to make sure that she was okay after her kidnapping, and subsequent transformation. It was good to see that she was holding her head high… many would not.

A small smile tugged at his lips. Perhaps in time, he would have earned the right to ask for a second chance. However, that day was very far away. But maybe, the training he was going to begin with her tomorrow would be a start.

Naruto's stomach twisted into knots, and it wasn't from the ramen he had shoveled into his belly. No, it was because after they simultaneously quit, everyone quietly agreed to go back to his apartment and talk things out.

What should he say? Should he be angry? Rant and rave at them about what he had gone through, and call them cowards? Should he make things easy and forgive them? He had Hinata, but he couldn't deny that he had wanted a family for so long. He wanted to know what it was like to have a mother and father, and he had a second chance. Most never did. It was like throwing away a precious gift, and insulting all those who also wished for that gift. Did he even need them anymore? Would they become more of a problem then anything else? So many years had been spent on his own doing his own thing. What if it turned out that much of what he did would no longer be acceptable under their parenting?

These were Naruto's thoughts as he sat quietly at the table in his kitchen. Minato and Kushina sat across from him both just as silent. Hinata had feigned tiredness and locked herself up in her bedroom. This had left them in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable or even hostile. Rather, it felt more like everyone was lost and didn't know how to move forward. They were finally together for the first time ever… what now?

"What do you want from me?" Naruto asked as he finally focused on them. "Do you want to know if I'm okay, or to work out some kind of family thing? Are you looking for forgiveness, or what?"

"That's really more for us to ask you," Minato said. "We made our decisions, Naruto. You didn't have a choice then. You do now though."

"That's right," Kushina smiled sadly. "Naruto, I want nothing more than to erase the past sixteen years and go back to you being the little bundle I held for a month. At least, I want us to move on and be together. But… but that's not my choice nor is it easy."

"Great." Naruto rubbed his face angrily. "Because I don't have a clue how to continue."

"Talk it out, let us hear your thought process," Minato said. "It might help to sort it out."

"But that's just it! I don't have a thought process." Naruto gave a frustrated grin. "I should feel angrier than I am, or really happy. But, when I see you two… I just don't know what to feel."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. I think I should feel something. A connection or bond, but right now… it's no different than having two strangers in my home." He watched as their faces fell slightly. "I'm not saying that to be cruel, honest."

"We know." Kushina smiled as she squeezed her eyes shut. "It's just really painful to hear. It might have been easier to hear that you hate us."

"I can't hate you. I don't even know you."

"Would you like to?" Minato asked as he stared at the table in thought. "If we just took things one day at a time, would that be

something you'd want to do?"

Naruto looked off to the side.

"I don't know. I suppose part of it is I can't relate the word parents to you guys yet. It has always been a word that meant something that I desperately wanted. When Ero-sensei revealed the truth to me that changed. Part of me felt abandoned and betrayed, but the other part of me was so proud that I had parents that would do so much for their village. But even then, the word never had a face to it. It had a meaning, but I still lacked an actual understanding of what I was supposed to feel. You understand what I'm trying to say right?"

"You haven't learned what the word means beyond its definition. There is no emotional significance to it." Minato looked up. "That is understandable, but you can learn how. You haven't answered my question."

"It's because I don't know what that answer is." Naruto looked at him and smiled weakly. "There is so much going on right now. The Akatsuki is out there, and it is my responsibility to stop them. They got the Kyubi because of me so I have to stop them. Ero-sensei is taking me tomorrow to give me that ability. My mind is just… full. I want to say that once the bad guys are in the ground I can put more focus on this. But we all know that there is always that one more threat."

"Man Minato," Kushina looked over at her husband. "He really is like us. It really pisses me off!"

She flung the table to the side and grabbed his jacket. He felt himself being lifted into the air and shook roughly.

"You little bastard, I didn't lose my gorgeous figure for nine months just for you to not have time to think about me!"

Naruto was about to bite out an angry reply when he felt his feet touch the ground and her hug him. She held his head against her

shoulder, and he could feel her pouring as much emotion into the embrace as possible. It was like she was trying to put many years worth of love into the single action. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the action stirred something even though it was so faint he could barely notice it.

"I'm sorry, Naruto," she said as she held him there. "Can you… just let me be selfish one more time? I want to hold my son just one more time."

"… Okay," he said. His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"You've become a wonderful young man. You are so kind and strong, but aren't afraid to be a little goofy. That Hinata girl is as lucky to have you as you are her."

"Th- than-."

"I know this doesn't mean anything to you, but I love you so much." Naruto felt his words get caught in his throat. "And I am so proud of you."

She stepped away from him and made her way out the door before he could say anything. He looked at where she had left in a daze. Minato put a hand on his shoulder shaking him from his thoughts.

"I agree with her completely, Naruto. You have become the kind of man any father would be proud to have. So far, we have only heard about you from what Jiraiya and others have praised. We'll look forward to seeing it for ourselves from now on." Minato started out for the door. "Our door is always open, son. Whether it is to talk, train, or eat ramen, we will be there from now on."

Minato quickly exited and shut the door behind him. As soon as the door clicked shut, Naruto collapsed to his knees as the torrent of emotions came into full effect. His eyes watered as he gripped the carpet on his floor. What the hell was wrong with him? Why did he feel so… so-?"

He felt Hinata come up behind him and wrap her arms around him. She rested her head on his back, and he let his guard down completely.

The Great Toad Sage gasped as he was violently disturbed from his meditation. His hands shook as he moved them away from each other. What he had seen… it contradicted all that he had come before. Evil red eyes had stared back at him as if they were aware of his presence. Something that should be impossible given his visions was merely precognitions. For something like that to occur… it hinted that something had become more in tune to nature than even himself. Something malevolent… and that carried an ominous wind behind it.

Madara couldn't repress the smirk he had forming behind his mask. He hadn't even begun to harness the power he'd earned yet, and he was already causing nature itself to cower in his presence. He could see everything that the rising moon could. It would take a little longer for him to resurrect the Jubi and gain its power. For now though, he could hit any single person under the moons glow with his Tsukuyomi.

He had been surprised when he had seen the long dead Yondaime within the streets of Konoha. Such a resourceful ninja would prove difficult for Pain to handle. Momentarily, he'd thought about ensnaring him. However, the no longer deceased shinobi would no doubt figure out a way to escape it. Even if he did not, Madara did not desire to see Konoha brought within his rule. He wanted it forgotten as the winds swept away its ashes.

He turned his attention to someone else that had failed to yield to his will. The foolish Raikage had gone forward with his little message requesting an alliance. He would make a good puppet, and it would allow him to achieve penance for his insubordination. It would also see if the rumors were true that the Yondaime Raikage was as fast as the Yondaime Hokage.

Naruto stared at the heavy oak doors that led to the Hokage's office. Honestly, he still wasn't sure this was the right thing to be doing even after going over it most of the night. His mind and emotions were jumbled at the moment so maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Then again, maybe it was because of that this was the first time he was thinking clearly. After all the boasts, struggles, and victories, it seemed strange to stop. However, the rescue mission had taught him some valuable lessons. It had revealed a lot of false ideas he had had. No… even before that, he had begun to question certain things.

"Either come in or get lost," Tsunade's voice carried through the doors.

Naruto steeled his resolve and pushed the doors open.

"Naruto? What have you come to bug me about now?" Tsunade asked. "I just finished getting rid of the headache from visiting Shino."

"Sorry Baa-chan… I figured before I leave in an hour with Ero-Sensei I should talk to you."

"About what exactly?"

"Becoming Hokage."

Tsunade stared at him with a raised eyebrow before she sputtered and started to laugh. He frowned, but kept any outbursts in check. Now wasn't the time for that… yet.

"So you take out Danzo and start thinking you-."

"I don't want it."

"Wh- what?" Tsunade choked out.

"I don't want it." Naruto made sure to keep his gaze even. "I know you've been giving me more responsibilities, and I'm really glad you

have, but if you are planning on training me to replace you someday… I wanted to tell you to look elsewhere."

Tsunade stared at him for a moment in disbelief, or as if she was expecting a prank. When she must have realized he was being serious, she leaned back and clasped her hands in front of her chin. She motioned for him to sit with her pinky, and waited for him to comply.

"What's brought this on suddenly?"

"It hasn't been that sudden. I honestly hadn't thought about being Hokage for a while now. There was so much else going on that it seemed irrelevant. But a lot of it is because of the rescue mission."

"I read your report. Considering the situation, you adapted your plan reasonably well and demonstrated acceptable leadership."

"Then you know what old lady Chiyo said."

"Yes, it was harsh but true. No doubt it is also a major factor in why the mission was successful."

"I know she was right, and that is why I can't be the Hokage."

"Explain."

"I'm never not going to be the guy that throws himself in harms way to protect his friends, or not exhaust every possible chance to save someone. Chiyo showed me that a Hokage does not have that luxury. I have to throw people in harms way and can only jump in if the opponent is too strong for them, and even then that may not be a possibility. I have to be able to do what I did to Hinata at any time."

"That is true."

"Baa-chan, the original reason why I wanted to become Hokage was so that people would recognize and respect me. I have that now."

"So you quit because your own goals have been satisfied? That sounds like you're turning your back on the village."

"Tsunade, I love this village." Naruto's eyes shined with determination as his voice gained strength. "I want to give my all for it, but I won't be doing that if I seek leadership for selfish reasons, just like Danzo did."

"Are you afraid you're like him? Because I can assure you that is not the case."

"No, I know that. However, he did teach me one thing during our fight."

"Which was?"

"A ninja has to consider where they will be the most benefit to the village."

"What more vital position is there than Hokage? Naruto, you are grasping for excuses."

"No, you're not seeing what I'm getting at. Look at Ero-sensei. He wouldn't be half as effective if he was stuck behind a desk."

"… True."

"The fact is I am more like him than you. I can be of more use if I'm pointed in a direction and told to go. I'm not saying this because I'm scared or quit or anything like that. I've learned a lot, and I've grown a lot. I want to be where I can do the most good for this village."

He stared at her unflinchingly as she scrutinized him, searching for any sign of doubt or weakness. She wouldn't find any. Regardless of his own personal feelings, his parents had shown a dedication that caused his to pale in comparison. If he ever did have a family, it would come first. That could not be the case with a Hokage.

"I will take what you said under consideration, Naruto."

"Thank you, Baa-chan." He stood up to leave. "You know. If Shikamaru became Hokage, the rest of our team would be under his command. That would be one hell of a combination."

"Perhaps Naruto, perhaps."

For the life of her, the last person she would ever expect to train her would be her father. She had resigned herself to never seeing anyone from her old clan except in passing. She certainly wouldn't have suspected he would take her back to the compound, and deep beneath the clan head's private training chambers. They had walked for what seemed like hours down a spiraling stone staircase. It was a surprise for her that such a thing existed. After years of sneaking around under the floorboards, she had assumed that she new almost every inch of the under compound.

Hiashi pushed open a massive steel door, which gave a high pitched shriek. He stepped inside, and Hinata followed silently. The door shut as soon as they were in. She looked around at the large room. It was barren of anything but heavy metal walls.

"What is this Fa- Hiashi-san?"

"This is where the new head of the clan comes to learn the ultimate techniques of our clan."

Hinata's eyes widened and she turned around with a shocked look. Hiashi smiled slightly.

"You were at one point the head of the clan. How long your leadership was is irrelevant. It is required by our laws that the head know the principles behind our most secret techniques."

"I understand."

"We will also be tweaking your fighting style. It is powerful, but it lacks the polish that it could gain with a teacher's eye and wastes a

great deal of chakra. Finally, we will combine all of this with your eyes, since I was led to believe that you have not used them in combat yet."

Hinata felt her heart start pounding in her chest. He knew? This was not good. What she had done despite good intensions was sacrilege at best. As extensively noted in clan history, tampering of the Byakugan was punishable by long painful death. Brutal torture was the only acceptable means for one to be cleansed of such a sin. No one was ever supposed to know. Why had Tsunade-sensei betrayed her?

"Be at ease Hinata." Hiashi raised his hand calmingly. "The laws state that a Hyuga is not allowed to tamper with the Byakugan. You are not a Hyuga, nor posses the Byakugan correct?"

He looked at her expectantly, and she was momentarily caught off guard. Her father was using a technicality to protect and strengthen her? Had her victory changed him around so far? Shaking her head, she gave a deep bow.

"Thank you, Hiashi-san. Shall we begin?"

"Certainly, Hinata."

Gaara meditated serenely in the sunlight. Today was a rare day he had to himself. His sister was off nursing, or perhaps more accurately, aggravating the Nara. The people of Suna were off on their own, looking to see where they could be of use in the village now that they had stable housing. This left him with a warm sunny day to just sit and enjoy the quiet. It was something that he could get used to rather quickly. Maybe later, he would be lucky enough to lull his body into a nap beneath the sun. Yes, that would be very nice.

Something tugged in the back of his mind and he tilted his chin up. A decent sized group had set foot upon his sand trap. He calmly went through a few hand seals and an eye made of sand materialized

behind the group. He waited for his vision to shift to the sand made one. He recognized one person instantly. The large man was the current Raikage, without question. The other eight were a different story. However, they had on Akatsuki cloaks… that was enough information for him.

He lifted his hands up and summoned the almost invisible dust cloud from before. However as the particles lifted, one of the six that looked similar, spotted the particles with his strange eyes. He nodded at the dark haired woman and she enveloped all of them with paper. His sand rose to ensnare them entirely, but the paper orb seemed to lift off the ground and speed in Konoha's direction.

His eyes snapped open and he climbed to his feet. He quickly summoned a sand Bunshin to inform Tsunade, and took off in the direction by which the enemies would appear. It seemed he would not get a nap today.

"For cryin' out loud Jiraiya-chan, what've you been teachin' the boy?" Fukasaku, the elderly toad, asked as he watched Naruto's cheeks puff up again, as he sat under the oil waterfall. The little creature gave the blonde a fierce whack with a stick, and his cheeks returned to normal. "It took you seven months just to get to this point. He's been at it for only a few hours."

The Sannin grinned sheepishly.

"The gaki has been blending and balancing not only his physical and spiritual energies, but also the fox's, for years now. He can mix, measure, and match pretty much any combination of energy in his system. It's only a matter of him learning how the energy behaves."

"Still…"

"Trust me Pa. He's going to run smack into a brick wall once he has to gather it without the oil."

"Hm."

Authors Notes:

Here it is the calm before the final storm. Let me know what you think.

There was a little confusion about Hinata's new appearance. I think I covered most of it in this chapter, but to clarify, she does look exactly the same as before. The only changes are white skin, and dark verticle slits hidden behind her normal eyes. So please, dismiss any thoughts of Hinata with Orochimaru's jaw line.

I know some people were hoping for Naruto to lash out at his parents. Part of me was going to do that, but I ultimately decided on this route for two reasons. The first is that Kushina is brash like Naruto and I really wanted to show that. The second is that they are strangers to him, and Naruto isn't the type to hate people he doesn't know. He also isn't going to be cruel. So hopefully, there interactions showed the emotional weight, but was more in line with the characters personalities.

I think that's it. We're in the home stretch so let's see how high I can bring up the turmoil.

See you next week.

Hurricane

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 22:

Minato darted over the rooftops towards the nearest explosion. He had expected Madara to do something, but a direct attack without the Biju was not one of them. There was no doubt in his mind that Madara's first act of power would be to attempt and destroy the village that turned its back on him. However, the fact that the tailed beasts were not here meant that he had yet to fully access their power. The question that arose was then why the attack at all? It wasn't to halt any attack they were making. There was also no chance that he wouldn't hold back in making a show of his power. He was an Uchiha after all.

Could they have come to search for Naruto? It was possible, but for some reason, he doubted Madara would be worried about the new chakra. Akatsuki had left Gaara alone before hand. Granted, Naruto had been completely… gutted, but still. There was something he was missing, and he didn't like it.

His eyes darted to the side as more explosions echoed in the distance. He had been walking around Konoha with Kushina, as they tried to cheer each other up after a sleepless night of tears and regrets. It had not been easy to talk to their son, and his thought process had really notched up their guilt. They knew he was not trying to be cruel. In fact, they could tell how hard he was trying to give them what he could. It was more a matter of seeing in full force how hindered he had been in their absence. Things like love and family were alien to him, and even though he struggled to understand them, his lack of experience made it nearly impossible.

Shaking his head he tried to focus on where to head to. There were several attacks throughout the city. They were most likely diversionary tactics. The Hokage's office would be made secure, and civilians and younger ninja would be escorted to safety. He needed to buy some time for them. His rationalizing was cut off as a flicker of something zoomed past him. A large dark skinned man appeared before him. An aura of lightning surrounded him, and two rage filled eyes stared directly at the blonde. Minato noticed three nearly transparent tomoe buried deep behind the man's regular pupils.

He frowned. The tomoe pattern was identical to what the Kyubi's eyes held the night of its attack. It affirmed his belief that it was Madara behind this. However, the fact that he was controlling this person meant that this man was not Akatsuki. It meant that he shouldn't kill him if given a choice… but that could prove difficult.

"Give me back my brother, Akatsuki scum," the man said. When Minato didn't answer, the man's electric energy grew even larger and wilder. "As Yondaime Raikage of Kumogakure no Sato, I command you to release my brother!"

Minato leapt back as the man disappeared from his vision. This wasn't good. A massive forearm caught him clean in the chest, and he was sent flying backwards as the air was violently forced from his lungs. He sailed like a missile through the adjacent building. Never in his life had someone gotten the drop on him. He forced himself to flip back and land on his feet. Had he failed to build up chakra in his chest the instant before he was hit Konoha would have to have his funeral… again.

His hair stood up on the back of his neck, and he ducked down. The same forearm missed his chest by a paper's width as he formed a Rasengan on the tip of his elbow and jabbed it behind him. The Raikage vanished an instant before the attack connected, but Minato kept going and burrowed a hole in the floor so he could escape down below. As he fell, his hand dove into his coat and grasped as many of his personal kunai as he could. His hands shot out and the blades sunk into their intended targets perfectly.

He looked up as an electrified elbow raced straight for his face. Just before it hit, he warped in a flash of light. The colorless world of the Hiraishin replaced his normal senses. He could see the man moving at normal pace, an incredible feat that was only surpassed by Madara. Normally, Minato could dictate how fast his opponent appeared to him. It was one of the key aspects of the technique, and why he could strategize during an instantaneous flash. However, the man was moving so fast that he appeared to be quick even in this world.

However, it would not do him any good because he was still faster. He watched as the man landed, and he pulled himself to the nearest kunai. He dropped out of the technique with a Rasengan at the ready. The attack appeared into the regular world first, and inch behind the Raikage, and yet, it might as well have been telegraphed from a mile away. Like a lighting bolt, the man was gone and at the reappearing Minato's side. The resurrected Hokage vanished again.

So he was faster in terms of speed, but his opponent was faster in terms of reaction time?

This was going to be a long game of tag.

A giant rhino charged through the streets of Konoha, crushing anything unfortunate enough to be in its path. The gleaming horn atop its nose lowered as a trio of genin scrambled to escape. Shino appeared and grabbed the top of the horn. He wrenched the horn down causing the creatures head to twist upwards. The things feet kicked out from under it, and it crashed into the ground as the bug user landed calmly between the downed monstrosity and the genin.

"Go and find shelter," Shino said as two orange haired men stepped out from around the corner. "Make sure to escort any civilians you find along the way."

The genin nodded quickly and took off down the path. Shino ignored the growing cries of the Summon as his nano bugs slowly ate their

way down its horn and into its brain. The two newcomers stared at him as they came closer. Something was off about them, especially the one that held that annoying false grin. He lifted his hands and a swarm of regular Kikaichu poured out from under his sleeves. The insects raced forward, but the bigger grinning one stepped in front and took all of the attack.

So, that was it. Shino quickly retracted his bugs. The big one wasn't alive. No, even beyond that, his Kikaichu told him that it wasn't even predominately organic. That… was problematic. Three of his hives were dependent upon the enemy's body to maximize their effectiveness. The explosive, nano, and regular Kikaichu needed both flesh and chakra to be useful. The fact that the man, or more correctly, thing before had negligible amounts of both would hinder his normal methods. He would have to get his hands dirty relying on brute force… his father would be displeased. The rhino gave one last shriek before going completely still, and Shino rushed forward in a blur.

The thin enemy in back brought his hands up for a hand seal. However, a glimmering sword flashed and four of the man's fingers fell to the ground. He leapt back as Yugao lunged forward again and sliced deeply along his chest. The heavier man that Shino was charging looked back, and the bug user slammed his fist into the robotic thing's face. Yugao dodged to the side as Shino's opponent tumbled by and nearly collided into the other one.

"The Hokage has agreed to your release?" Shino asked as he walked up next to the purple haired ninja.

"Not entirely." She gave him a quiet smile. "Ibiki let me leave if I promised to fight the invaders… and return to my cell afterwards."

"He trusts you otherwise he would not do something so risky. Why come here though?"

"You saved my life."

"It was my responsibility as another Konoha-nin."

"Of course, and it is my responsibility to return the favor." She rested the blade on her shoulder and walked forward. "We should eliminate these two quickly."

"We?"

"The big one is trying to protect the thin one, which is the one that uses the Summons. It will be difficult to handle both by yourself."

"I believe that it would be better management if-."

"Chunin." Yugao turned with a sly grin. "You defeated me soundly. But, do not assume that you witnessed my true abilities with my jumbled mind."

Shino was not sure whether he liked such a grin on the woman's face or not.

"Very well, let's finish this quickly then, Anbu-san."

"It's Yugao."

Shino rushed the big one again. When he had struck it before, it had not been damaged to the degree it should have. The false human's skin was quite resilient. Her sword would not be able to cut it, so he would deal with it. His opponent seemed to have a similar train of thought.

Yugao did not waste anytime as she blew white hot flames down the edge of her sword. She used a Shunshin to quickly move toward the one she had cut before. He never had a chance… or so she thought. Her instincts screamed at her as her blade swung down. Not even bothering to spare a glance, she twisted in the air and brought her blade up defensively. A saw like tail smashed into her sword and pushed her backwards. Sparks hissed angrily as the two razor edges fought against each other. She looked up.

The thing had removed its cloak, and revealed three heads and six arms, all of which were being used to wrestle against her partner. Shino tried to keep his face neutral as he struggled to push against his opponent's strength. It shouldn't be possible. The vitalization type invigorated his muscles and drew out the maximum amount of force. Speed, power, and stamina were all increased with the bacteria sized bug's assistance. Yet, this puppet contraption was holding him back with ease.

The tail that had knocked Yugao back snaked around towards him. Hypothetically, the tail should strike with an equivalent amount of force to the arms. If that was they case his armor type colony would not be able to withstand the force. With his arms bound so tightly, he would not be able to create a bug clone and escape. With all his strength, he lifted one of his feet and kicked the thing in the jaw, knocking it in the path of the tail. The saw blade stabbed into the back of its wielder's neck with a piercing metallic screech.

He felt his captor's grip loosen enough to pull away and jumped back. This wasn't working. He could not match his enemy by brute force. Yugao landed next to him as he shifted his jacket. His mind quickly calculating a plan. Yes, that could work.

"The other one got away."

"It can no longer summon so it has been mostly neutralized. Can you restrain that saw tail long enough for me to get in close?"

"Sure."

Shino accessed the one bug type he had not used in battle yet. He faded way from view like a chameleon and charged forward. The entire fight left a bad taste in his mouth. His actions had been far more barbaric than normal. It lacked the collected cool of his father. He must have been hanging around his abnormal uncle for too long. After he survived this, he would make sure to do better in adapting his bugs into a better strategy.

He saw Yugao go straight for the tail and start slashing at it with an ethereal grace. Her movements were far more graceful and potent than they had been when they fought. His mind had serious doubts if he would be able to defeat her as easily should the opportunity arise again. Ignoring that, he zipped behind the living puppet and reached under his coat. He grabbed the explosive type that had been feeding off his own chakra and blood. It would create a powerful explosion, but he would most likely pass out soon. The bug had not held back in its feeding.

He cupped it in his fist and punched a hole through his enemy's back. The bug was released into the puppet's system, and he went to leap away as his legs gave out. His vision started to tunnel as he saw the body before him start to explode. How disappointing.

Gaara wiped the blood from his eyes. Never before had he met an opponent so infuriating. The silver haired man in front of him would not die. He had ripped him apart, only for thick black threads to emerge from his body and pull him back together. He had used his sand to crush him, only for him to break free within a mass of tendrils. His opponent had even gotten him to bleed. He had been careless and gotten sliced across the forehead when several tendrils shot up from under the ground.

The bastard had swallowed his blood and inscribed some type of seal on the ground. At first, Gaara had believed the man was merely insane, a belief that had been compounded upon when he stabbed his own leg with that ridiculous weapon. That was until his own leg began to spasm and ache from a stab wound. He had immediately erased the seal on the ground and pushed the man back.

It was moments like this that he cursed never having a proper teacher. He had always battled on instinct or relied on his sand. His battle prowess was not something he often doubted, but his lack of understanding the enemy was becoming more of a problem. He had mastered himself, but had yet to master adaptation. Once this battle

was done, he would be sure to corner the white haired Sannin and request a training trip until he reached a higher level of observation.

"You're a pain in the ass, you little fu-."

Gaara smashed a fist of sand down on top of the man. He did not care for the immortal's choice of language either.

"Ouch," Hidan said as his tendrils pulled him together. "Jashin-sama will appreciate your blood greatly."

Gaara had to repress a shudder. The act of serving blood to another in order to gain praise was something a little too personal for him. He reached his hand out. This needed to end now. Sand shot out of the ground from his sides and engulfed Hidan before he had a chance to move. Gaara closed his hand and watched as the sand crushed the opponent. He swung his arm down and dragged the body under the ground.

Suddenly, a pillar of the black threads erupted below him, and he barely leapt back in time to prevent being skewered. His sand picked up more movement from below, but it wasn't rising and located in a small area… oh no. Excruciating pain ripped through his chest, and he began to cough blood uncontrollably. Those threads… they must have acted as a shield so that his opponent could still move.

He collapsed to his knees and clutched his heart, as the tendrils pulled out the man from below. Hidan laughed as his face faded back to normal.

"Ah man, was that as good for you as it was for me? You little bastard!" He kicked Gaara in the side cruelly.

The Kazekage could only grunt as he tumbled out onto his back, and his vision swam. Yet, there was no pain. He found it strange that such numbness would accompany the one thing he had feared for so long. Death, a finality that for many years people had attempted

to bring down upon him. A fate he had escaped thanks to friends, an end that he would now meet.

He was only partially lucid now and could feel a part of him yearning to just close his eyes. But, deep within him, there was something that wouldn't let him. A knowing thought scraped against the back of his skull in a desperate attempt to escape from him.

He could not defeat that man. Gaara of Suna, Godaime Kazekage, and Jinchuriki of Shukaku was unable to stop his killer. If he couldn't, who would it fall to? Would this man find Temari or his people and enact his bloodthirsty acts upon them? Would Naruto be forced to shoulder the weight for his shortcomings yet again?

No.

Gaara reached out as Hidan walked away whistling a happy tune. It had been said that desperation can lead to ingenuity. Never had it been more true than in this moment. No longer concerned with his own survival, he could devote all of himself to his enemy's destruction. He sharpened columns of sand and caused them to shoot forward and through his opponent's body. He forced his sand to split into streams smaller and smaller going beyond human levels of control. His enemy screamed as every vein, pore, and fiber was filled or coated in sand. Blood trickled from Gaara's nose as his mind started to shatter from the strain he was placing on it.

His fingers spread wide.

Hidan burst into a red cloud of mist and bits. Gaara didn't stop though. He would test just how far immortality went. The remnants were swept up in his sand and tossed into either the wind or under the ground. The millions of particles that were once Hidan were spread far apart from one another to ensure the tendrils could never rebuild him. They would float for miles and never stop traveling.

A ghost of a smile haunted Gaara's lips as his wide eyes became lifeless. His mind and body broken.

His soul departed.

Pain, the Deva path, tossed another broken Konoha-nin to the side. This mission had cost him dearly. All of his bodies had been defeated far too fast to replicate. Kakashi of the Sharingan was personally responsible for three of them alone. Granted they were the weaker paths and the copy-nin had garnered the assistance of several others, but still, it was a heavy price. The only benefit was that Kakashi was exhausted. Animal path had also been rendered unable to summon, and he had been forced to discard it.

He was unconcerned, however. By dropping the other bodies, he merely increased this precious body's powers. It was merely a waste of resources that had him disgruntled. As long as he had this body and Konan, there was no defeat. There was no denying his divinity. If he was pushed into a corner, he could always level this arrogant village with a single technique.

A gentle breeze ruffled his hair, and he noticed the chakra laced within it barely a second before it spun violently. He pushed his chakra out as a twister engulfed him. The attack was quite powerful, but no match for his Shinra Tensei. His eyes drifted over his shoulder as the winds settled. A woman with burgundy hair stepped out from the nearest alley. She grinned widely and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ah, so it seems I get to fight with a strong one," Kushina said as she rolled her neck around. "I've got some anger to burn off. So I wouldn't want to beat you too quickly."

"You?" Pain turned around fully as his Rinnegan glared. "Presume to defeat me?"

"You going to prove me wrong?" Kushina's grin faded and her expression became more serious. "You're after my son so I don't see that happening."

Pain's eyes widened a minute fraction. He had been under the impression that his target's parents were both long dead, or at least, they had abandoned their Jinchuriki son. The wind started to swirl again. He could see the chakra emanating from the woman. She would be troublesome if she could control the wind in the same manner Konan could control paper.

"Where is the Nine Tails, Naruto Uzumaki?"

"Getting ready to kick your ass!"

She launched a wave of wind at him in a swirl of dust. He pushed back, but could not help but lose sight of her. She appeared behind him as if emerging from the air itself. Her hand clutched a kunai and she stabbed toward the back of his neck. He caught her arm as he spun and brought his leg up for a kick. She blocked with her free palm and disappeared in a gust of wind.

A frown crept up on his face. His assumption proved correct. She could manipulate the wind, however, her abilities were more similar to that of Gaara of Suna than Konan. Perhaps, her control surpassed them both. Yet, he knew from Konan that that specific type of chakra usage was draining. The Jinchuriki of the One Tail circumvented this because he held a Biju. Konan had infused every sheet of paper with her chakra ahead of time and thus did not use a great deal of chakra. So either this woman had abnormal reserves… or she was a fighter that depended on her battles ending quickly.

Judging from her fighting style, she was the latter.

The woman appeared again from above, prepared for an aerial stomp. Suddenly, a surge of paper surrounded her and carried her higher up over the rooftops. Konan's face emerged from one of the floating sheets.

"I will deal with her. You must quickly find the child. It is only us now."

"Agreed."

He watched her go before turning to head deeper into Konoha. The Hokage would know if no one else did. It would be interesting to see her reaction upon realizing who he was. A distant part of him was amused by that aspect. He prepared to leap up to the rooftops when his entire body went rigid. His heart stopped for a moment as a bestial all powerful roar reached his ears. The air grew thick and heavy with an omnipotent malevolence.

"Madara." Pain turned toward the direction of the sound and could see the red glow in the horizon. "You bastard."

Madara grinned behind his mask as he saw Konoha through the eyes of the Kyubi. The idyllic little cluster of homes and buildings lined up like dominoes for his amusement. How he wished to see their fear and regrets as the Nine Tails stomped towards them. Its fangs dripping as its maw came steadily closer to the bite sized snacks called Konoha-nin. Oh how he would savor the prideful Raikage's expression. Now that he was free of his control, would he flee or fight the beast?

Alas, he would not be able to witness it. All the eyes were open on the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path. Years of effort were about to be rewarded. He walked forward and placed his hand upon it. The mouth creaked and started to open, revealing a passage down into its dark throat. He stepped in confidently and strode down through the dark tunnel. It opened up into a small room. His Sharingan focused on the shadow in the center of the room… and laughed.

"That's it Hinata! Keep focusing on increasing the density of your chakra."

"Three more laps around the Land of Fire and then we return home, Lee!"

"Yosh, Gai-sensei!"

"Where are you going Ero-sensei?"

Jiraiya turned to Naruto.

"Tsunade didn't respond to the message I sent to her this morning. I'm just going to pop into Konoha, make sure things are okay, and then come back."

Naruto crossed his arms with a pout.

"You're probably just bored and are going to go peeping." Naruto's expression became more serious. "If you really are concerned, shouldn't I come too?"

"You've only been at this one day, and even though you can balance and gather nature energy, you still can't synch with Pa and lack much of the techniques that come with being a Toad Sage. Keep training, I'll call you if there's trouble."

Naruto frowned, but nodded.

"Okay, but no peeping!"

FIVE DAYS LATER:

Flames licked at the night sky as they danced among the embers and hollow remains of buildings. Like burning skeletons, they stood as a reminder of what was. Once strong stone walls crumbled slowly as gravity sought to finish what something else started. The parts of fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends, and loved ones were scattered about like some kind of horrific breadcrumb trail. Crevices were filled with the remnants of bodies, as if whatever removed the rest of them did not bother to pull them out of hiding.

Hinata walked around the deserted village streets as if she were in a trance. Five days were all that she had been gone. This was only the

fifth night of her absence, but her home looked like it had been abandoned and torn apart by war for years. What had done this?

She had emerged only an hour ago to an empty compound. She had emerged into… this. Her father had been in a rare case of shock, but had quickly covered it up and suggested that they search for answers. They had found none. It was quickly decided that he would go to the Hokage's office and try to see if an outpost had been setup. She was to go to the monument and see if that is where the survivors were… if there were survivors.

A muffled snort drew her attention away from her thoughts as her eyes cut to the left. The sloppy sound carried from over the other side of the dilapidated buildings. Forcing down the urge to move as far away as possible, she silently made her way through the wreckage. Her heartbeat increased with each step she came closer and the noise got louder. She pressed her back against the closest wall and turned around the corner.

Her face drained of all color as she saw the source of the sounds. The beast stood easily five stories tall. Its reddish brown fur seemed to reflect the scattered fires as perfectly as a mirror. Nine plush tails swayed to and fro slowly and steadily as its massive head leaned down. Nightmarish jaws crunched down on a corpse as the odd hand or foot was separated from their host.

The Kyubi was just as terrible as described and then some. She could feel the evil nature of the creature as if it was as palpable as the stone her back was against. Her mouth went dry. Leave… she needed to leave quickly. She turned to slip away when her ears picked up on single sound that caused her blood to freeze. It sniffed.

She pushed her back tight against the remains of the wall she was up against as if she could do it hard enough she would merge into it and be safe. The thing stood. Its obsidian claws gouging out the dirt as its paws shifted. A low growl rumbled from the back of its throat, and for the slightest of moments, Hinata felt like an infant in a crib.

This creature was an apex predator. Its aura exuded that to the point that even her newfound instincts cowered.

She went rigid as a lone bloodshot yellow eye lowered down just beyond her. The awful Sharingan pattern seemingly guiding the creature. Her fist clenched as the creature sniffed again. Its head swiveled towards her, and she sent a chakra lion encased fist straight into the accursed pattern.

The creature bellowed out in a mixture of pain and rage. She didn't bother to see how much of each it was. Using every ounce of chakra and muscle her body had, her feet carried her forward as the building she was in exploded as a massive paw connected with it. How she was going to escape was beyond her. The only thing her instincts were letting her think was to run as fast as possible. She desperately tried to block out the sounds of the buildings crashing to the ground and fury filled roars giving chase.

Which was why, when she felt something grab her and disappear in a flash of light, she was not ashamed when she accidentally punched the Yondaime after his prized technique ended.

Kushina didn't care if her ribs were broken and hurt like hell. She didn't care if the situation was awful and solemn. She didn't care if everyone was battered, angry, or ready to quit. Seeing her husband sporting a black eye that he had received from her son's girlfriend had to be the funniest thing she had ever seen. So she had laughed and laughed until tears streamed down her face. It was the only way to keep her head on her shoulders. Just laugh and things would get better. Just laugh and hopelessness couldn't sink its teeth into you like the monster scouring their home.

"Minato-kun, you should know better than to go around grabbing pretty young girls," Kushina managed to get out between fits of laughter. "You are so lucky she didn't use a real attack."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Yondaime-sama." Hinata bowed furiously as the blonde man rubbed his swollen eye.

"It's Minato, Hinata-san. Don't worry. You had every right to panic." He looked over at Kushina, who was holding her injured sides, with a frown. "Must you laugh at my misfortune, Kushina?"

"Sorry, Minato-kun." Kushina sucked in a deep breath and calmed down. She looked over at the confused Hinata. "Why were you out wandering around Hinata-chan?"

Hinata blushed slightly at the name Kushina gave her, but quickly shook it off.

"My father and I had just come out of where we were training when we saw… Konoha. We split up looking for survivors and the Hokage."

Kushina couldn't help but wince, and wished she hadn't. Hinata's eyes grew more worried by the second.

"Minato-kun, why don't you see if any of the others have found Hiashi. I'll fill Hinata in on what's happened."

"Agreed, I'll be back soon."

He disappeared in a flash, and Kushina sat down.

"The Akatsuki attacked while you were away. We originally thought they were after Naruto again. It was the supposed leader of the group after all."

"Supposed?"

"His name is Pain, or Nagato to be correct. He came looking for Naruto, but it appears he was tricked."

"Someone sent him here, and then sent the Kyubi?"

"Yeah." Kushina looked up at the cracks in the ceiling of their little underground bunker. "Needless to say, everyone stopped fighting pretty quickly."

"You mean, he helped you?"

"Apparently, this was not in his plans or what he wanted it to come down to."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes, at least for now. He could have run, but instead he fought. Not exactly sure what his angle is, but it's not like we can turn down any extra help."

Kushina could see that the younger girl wasn't sold. It was understandable. Pain was Akatsuki and directly responsible for this mess. However, it was for that reason that she was willing to work with him. The orange haired man never shied away from the fact that the Nine Tails was there because of him. In fact, his only focus had been to get to the one she had been fighting. That paper user was a tough witch. Every wind attack was blocked by parchment, every Shunshin and Futon: Bunshin was negated.

However, she could happily say the same could be said with her opponent's attacks. Plus, it wasn't like she had gone all out. Had she let out with her signature move the fight would have been over. The problem was that so would she. And then… she would be suffering more than a few bruises and busted ribs. Those tails may look super fluffy, but they still felt like steel columns.

"What happened to Tsunade-sensei?" Hinata kept her face calm, even as her eyes begged Kushina to lie to her. "Or everyone else?"

"When the Kyubi hit, Tsunade used Katsuyu to keep everyone alive and relatively uninjured. However… it taxed her chakra and made her immobile while the technique was up and running. The fox… went straight for the tower."

"Why?"

"Minato believes that our real enemy, Madara Uchiha, is controlling the fox or at least influencing it."

"Then, it got-."

"No, Jiraiya appeared last night. The rest of the village had managed to distract the Kyubi for several hours and defend the tower. Those are the bodies you saw outside. Jiraiya single handedly battled with the Kyubi while Tsunade put everything she had into making sure people had enough strength to find shelter. Minato arrived just in time to see both of them pass on together, and before that damned monster could get to them."

Kushina gave a sad smile as Hinata fought back tears. The last of the Sannin were gone. Perhaps, it was a blessing that they went together. The two old friends wouldn't know what to do without the other. But, it was still kind of said. Jiraiya had boasted to them about how Tsunade was going to marry him once all this was over. He had been so… happy at the idea. All night, he'd gone on about how he would get to see two of his students become Hokage. That he could see the men he considered his child and grandchild gain families. That he would do it with a woman he had chased after for most of his life.

Of course, she couldn't resist teasing him about the fact that Tsunade would be wearing the pants in the relationship. Or, more likely, she would probably kill him before it ever got to that point. The Toad Sage had also ignored the fact that he would no longer be allowed to write his books.

"How many casualties?" Hinata asked.

"We don't know. We think only the small force of Anbu that halted its advance to the tower, and several other small groups that got caught off guard. It's terrible, but considering it is the King of Biju we're dealing with… I can't help but feel grateful it is not much more."

"Konoha is like a ghost town. What I don't understand is why it isn't leveled. The Kyubi was legendary in its ability to destroy mountains. It was a force of nature."

"It's because its power has been severely limited," Minato said as he appeared. "It is nothing more than a giant rabid fox with a couple tails worth of demonic chakra and a hyper- rejuvenation ability."

"What?"

"When I faced the Kyubi before, jutsu dissipated before they came within a dozen feet of it. It was as powerful as in legend. It can't do that now, which is why it could be deterred from the tower. The other aspect is that it is ravenous right now."

"You mean it didn't eat people before?"

"No, it was nothing more than a thing of destruction. It didn't feed so voraciously like it is now."

"Then, that means we can fight it right?" Hinata looked back and forth between the two of them. "You said it's not as powerful so we should be able to stop it."

Kushina glanced over at Minato. She had said the same thing. Everyone in their little makeshift bunker was itching to tear that thing apart. However, he had informed her of several problems the least of which was its phenomenal healing ability. It required something of equally massive chakra to blast it. Jiraiya in Sage mode would have been plenty, but from what they had assumed, he did not want to risk disturbing Naruto's teaching. The Kyubi, no matter how powerful, was only a distraction to the greater threat.

She hated the idea that it once again came down to Naruto. That once again they were depending on her child. The only difference was that this time, there weren't a bunch of old bastard blackmailing her into abandoning him. This time, she would be there in whatever capacity he would allow.

Her biggest issue was that Minato was unable to do anything. Madara was doing something to negate any seal that Minato tried. Her husband was strong, but he lacked the enormous chakra of Jiraiya or Naruto. He lacked those mountain leveling techniques. Normally, his genius made up for it and then some. But in this case, it was nothing but pure barbaric power they needed. It was the one thing they didn't have.

"Hinata-chan, we want to, but there are some other problems." Hinata glanced back at her. "Many civilians were not able to make it to the monument shelter. There are a lot of scattered groups hiding amongst the ruins. They try to move around, but the Kyubi is constantly hunting. We've been sending out small parties to try and distract it long enough for the survivors to escape."

"Are there any survivors here aside from you two?"

"Pain and his lover, Konan, also the Raikage."

"The Raikage?"

"He was manipulated into attacking. The two of us were matched evenly until Madara's genjutsu stopped." Minato sat down. "He immediately started attacking the Kyubi after that… and lost his left arm."

"Does he need a medic?"

"We stopped the bleeding and bandaged him up well enough. He still assists with our missions."

"He's pretty hard headed," Kushina whispered. "But, he is tough."

"Has Naruto-kun returned?" Hinata asked. "His newest technique would counter that monster's healing ability. Or maybe Shino or Gaara."

"Kakashi has been traveling back and forth underground. Shino is down for the count as well as a lot of other ninja's. Gaara is… missing. We haven't contacted Naruto yet. In fact, we told Fugasaku to keep him there."

Hinata looked surprised for a moment before her face lit up in understanding.

"You are afraid that the chakra will react to Naruto-kun's."

"Yes." Minato nodded. "But even more than that, Madara is the real threat. He controls all of the beasts, and the time I fought him during the first Kyubi attack, he treated me like an academy student."

If possible, Hinata turned even whiter at Minato's proclamation. It was a hard truth for anyone to hear. That their greatest and strongest hero was no match for an enemy. It was rather disheartening, no that wasn't it, terrifying was a better fit.

"Naruto is training to become a sage, something that even I didn't accomplish. He must complete the training in order to stand a chance. Even if all of Konoha has to be sacrificed, Madara must be stopped, and our son is the only one who can do that."

Madara sat back in the shadows as his body slowly adapted to the changes his new power granted. It was unfortunate that he had to give up all, but one of his Sharingan's abilities. Yet in the scope of things, they were trivial. He still had his favorite technique and that was more than enough for him. He settled deeper into his seat. It was boring just sitting and watching, but a small dose of patience would make his unveiling all the sweeter.

It may be foolish wanting a little drama. However, this was a moment that he wanted to savor. When he stepped out of the shadows, he wanted everyone to witness the new him in all his glory, an effect that would be diminished should anyone see him now. Besides, he would most like to reveal himself to that child. Yes, Naruto Uzumaki,

the last pitiful hope of Konoha's will of fire. How excruciatingly joyous it will be to crush that boy when he came. And he would come, and Madara would be prepared.

"You wanted to see us, Madara?" Zetsu called from outside the statue.

"Are you there as well, Kisame?"

"Yeah, I'm always at your command, Mizukage."

"You see the whimpering bodies of the tailed beasts around you, yes?"

Madara himself had been surprised when the statue had regurgitated the beasts one by one. They were merely soulless husks containing the personalities and residual chakra of the once great beasts. The Jubi had taken what it needed from them and discarded what remained. Now, they were nothing more that normal creatures. Afraid of death, and utterly powerless to stop it from claiming them.

"There is still usable and potent chakra in their flesh. Consume them. Devour their flesh, their bones, and their energy until all that is left is dust. Feast until you are sick, and then feast some more. Do not stop until you are literally bursting, and achieve a power second only to my own!"

He waited in silence as the soft pitiful whimpers of the beasts grew louder. Desperate pleas were ignored, and when he heard the first deliciously cruel crunch… he smiled.

Once, just once, he had had a nightmare like this. It was when he was what… eight? Every nook and cranny was identical to what his mind had tormented him with, the smell of burnt bodies and rotting remains. The night sky made despairingly darker because of the thick billowing smoke that smothered the stars and moon. Prophesy,

fate, destiny… these were thing he had refuted time and again. Yet seeing this, he couldn't help but wonder if that dream, so many years ago, was trying to tell him something.

Naruto stood at the top of the ruined walls that surrounded Konoha. His red overcoat flapped silently behind him. His blue eyes scanned the heartbreaking scene before him. His gut churned, and he knew it wasn't just because of the nausea the landscape stirred within. Something was pulling at his seal like a magnet. Two forces wanting to reunite with each other. A scowl formed on his face. That thing… that godforsaken thing was out there. Something bubbled within his chest. It wasn't fear or anger, but something he couldn't describe.

"Kyubi!"'

He screamed it so loud his voice seemed to stretch out as far as the sky. It was not a cry of desperation. The voice was a challenge. Even if you could not understand the word, the tone was so basic that any living thing could comprehend the meaning. Where are you? Show yourself. Let us see who is stronger! Come for me!

A malevolent roar echoed back, as if accepting the challenge. Naruto remained still for but a moment, and opened a pair of golden toad eyes. He pooled the chakra inside his body and vanished in a nature powered Shunshin. Across buildings and roads, he moved at impossibly fast speeds and covered unbelievable distances until he stood defiantly on the remains of the Hokage's tower. His eyes glared down on the beast's head as it stared back in an illogical rage. Its jaws were just a snapping distance from him.

"Alright you damn fox," Naruto said as he noticed the Sharingan pattern within the blood shot eyes. "I'm going to free you. And when this is over, you will never be a slave again. You will never hurt anyone again!"

Kyubi lunged with a roar, but Naruto was already behind it. He buried a Rasengan in the back of its skull causing it to tumble forward. His Shunshin carried him out of the way as several tails stabbed towards

him. Four clones appeared at each paw. Two had sage eyes, the other two had a single purple tail waving behind them. They hoisted the Kyubi up into the air as Naruto waited above. A blue sphere, larger than even he was, spiraled in his palm high above his head. He dove straight down as the monster's belly became expose to him.

"Senpo: Odama Rasengan!"

The technique was slammed against the creature as the Narutos below pulled out a kunai and pushed their wind chakra into the blades. The Kyubi fell onto the energy charged weapons with a fierce growl. Naruto didn't stop as he pushed more energy into his hand and let the spiral pull the wind element into it. He flung it down as hard as he could.

"Futon: Rasenshuriken."

The technique made a high screeching sound as it whipped around like a razor disk. It sliced deep into the fox and ripped through. The beast made a gurgling sound as Naruto landed on the ground and his eyes returned to normal. The nature energy having been used up, he watched warily as the beast gave a painful growl, but it quickly became a whimper as it became apparent the newest attack wouldn't heal. The cellular damage was too great.

Naruto took no satisfaction in seeing the cause of his years of loneliness suffer. This wasn't the Kyubi. It was a powerful creature sure, but not the unstoppable thing that had lived in his belly. Why Jiraiya never came back… why he died was beyond him. The pervert should have been able to handle this thing unless, his teacher didn't use his sage mode so that Fugasaku could train him. Yes, that was probably why… stupid pervert.

"Are you yourself again, Kyubi?" Naruto asked. "If not, I know you can hear me through him Madara. The toads told me all about you. Release the fox, I'll be coming for you soon enough."

The Sharingan morphed into an obscured face.

"I shall look forward to it, Naruto," the face within the eye said. "You can have your fox back."

The face vanished, and Kyubi's normal vertical slice appeared. The eye blinked and slowly shifted to focus on him. A deep rumbling chuckle escaped in a gasp of pain. The demon's mouth opened slowly revealing the familiar glimmering teeth. Naruto had to admit it was odd being able to see the fox in its entirety. Yet, it was also kind of awe inspiring to think that such a creature had been in him at one time. A creature that was so much weaker now.

"So, it is you," the Kyubi wheezed. "Fitting it would seem. I ruined your life, and so it is your right to end mine."

"That wasn't why I did this." Naruto looked at him unflinchingly. "Sure, I wanted to finally surpass you, to finally put the villager's fears to rest. But, I didn't want to fight what you were just now."

The fox laughed again.

"Foolish sentiment boy! You wished to fight me at my full power? You may have gained my power through years of absorbing and repressing it, but I assure you… I would still be victorious."

"It wasn't your strength. It was the demon fox I wanted to fight; the voice that taunted me all these years not some mind controlled monster."

"Ha! Your childish views still amuse me. You have killed your enemy that is all that matters."

"Yeah, I know it's pretty stupid." Naruto gave half a grin. "But that's how I feel."

The two were silent for a moment. The Kyubi's strained breathing the only sound around them.

"You're going after Madara, aren't you?"

Naruto knew there was no question in that statement. The bastard fox knew him far to well.

"Yeah, someone has to so it might as well be me. Besides, I'm itching to hit him."

"He will kill you, Naruto. Whether you defeat him or not, your death is as much a fact as water is wet."

"After all these years, you think my luck will run out huh?"

"Madara has gained the power of the Jubi, a creature from which all Biju originate. He robbed me of my power and immortality, and left me to die. The same has been done with the rest of them. Once mighty vestiges of chakra and power, we are all now nothing, but sacks of meat that will die slowly. Our immortality stripped, and our strength so weak it can barely maintain these forms. We will fade away into nothingness. You of all people should know what it is like to not exist… of how cruel that fate is."

Naruto nodded. Being forgotten or ignored, no longer seeming to matter was just too cruel. The early years of his life were all about that. He took a step forward. However, what he had realized was you had to fight against being ignored and never stop. If you were denied the right to exist, then you proved otherwise. You kept at it until no one could forget you. It was as simple as that. What Kyubi was doing was giving up.

He took another step and reached out with his palm. Ero-sensei had once told him that the hardest and yet greatest skill to master for a ninja was compassion. The ability to turn to an enemy and offer the hand of friendship, or to comfort someone who had wronged you. His teacher had said more people needed to master the skill, because it was needed so desperately.

"You are a being of evil, Kyubi." Naruto brushed his hand over the creature's fur. "You have done horrible things and shown no remorse for them. Some actions were done under Madara's thumb, others on

your own. In the end, the world will be better without you. However, I want to tell you I forgive you and thank you."

"Thank me?"

"You have made me stronger. Whether it was because of your constant attempts to weaken the seal, or because you kept me alive when I shouldn't have been. I would not be here today without you. I would not have the ability to face Madara without you. And for that, I am grateful to my father for sealing you in me… and you for being you."

Kyubi remained silent and just let Naruto continue to scratch behind its ears. The blonde thought that perhaps it was an expression of gratitude on the part of the fox… or maybe it was figuring out how to kill him. It didn't really matter to him either way. The beast's breathing was rapidly slowing down. It wouldn't be long.

"You… you now possess my other half, Naruto?"

"I thought you could tell."

"It calls to me, begging that I reclaim it. The energy does not realize that I do not have the strength necessary to wield it anymore."

The massive fox turned to its feet slowly, and shakily stood.

"I will gift you the remains of my yang chakra."

"Why?"

"I hate Madara even more so than you or that accursed Yondaime. If there is any chance that I can assist in crushing that man, then I will take it." Naruto stood still as the Kyubi cupped its paws around him. "Who knows, maybe some of my spirit will leak through in this transfer and I'll get the chance to devour you down the road."

"You can try you damn fox."

"Take my power as your own Naruto Uzumaki and crush Madara."

The energy radiated off of Kyubi's paws and surged around him. He felt it seep into every pore of his body, and the seal flare to life as it sucked up the chakra. Deep in his belly, he could feel the yin and yang chakra mixing together becoming one. It didn't increase in volume; rather the potency was far more than what he had ever felt before. He looked up as the energy around him died down. The fox's eyes grew dark and its fur lost its sheen. Slowly, the beast turned to stone as the last wisps of power entered his body. Naruto watched in silence as the stone chipped and crumbled away into dust.

"Goodbye, Kyubi."

Author's Notes:

Please let me know what you think.

So I have a few things to bring up.

The first is Kushina. People have mixed feelings on her, and I think one thing I am going to do next chapter is give her a little more back story. As much as I have tried to show, Kushina didn't just abandon Naruto because she didn't care. So expect a few pages next week to delve into Kushina's thoughts and motivations.

Second, I know there are going to be complaints about how quickly the invasion occurred, and the lack of showing the attacks. There were to reasons for this. The first is that Kyubi was sudden and I wanted to bring that feeling to it, that oh crap moment. The reason why I didn't show the attack was because I wanted you as the reader to experience it the same way as Hinata.

Third, similarly to the Danzo arc, I expect some of you to be upset with Konoha being powerless to stop the Kyubi. I tried to explain why to the best of my ability, but I did the same with Danzo and people

still didn't like it. Not going to change it, but just wanted to save you time and let you know I am aware of it.

Fourth, I owe you an apology. The brief switching between POV of Shino and Yugao is a cardinal sin of writing. However, I couldn't think of a smoother way to transistion without slowing down the action.

Void

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 23:

Pain stared quietly at the little bonfire he had made away from everyone else in their little bunker. He had discarded his original body and fully adapted his spirit to Yahiko's. It hadn't been his initial choice. More accurately, it had been his only choice. The Kyubi had found, or was more likely sent to, his real body shortly after it began its assault. He'd transferred all of his spirit and any chakra he could to Yahiko before the fox claimed his malnourished body.

Fusing completely with Yahiko was… uncomfortable. It should be no different than what he had done for years. Yet, it still made him feel slightly like a thief now that his presence couldn't leave the body. It did not help that he had lost a great deal of his chakra in the emergency transfer. In time, he would reclaim it, but time was what they lacked. Granted, he had enough chakra in him that crushing the Kyubi would have been simple. However, it would have cost him Madara's defeat. He had one powerful technique left in him, and the Uchiha was the only target for it.

He glanced over as Konan sat down next to him. She offered him a small plate of food. These Konoha-nin were a perplexing lot. He was their enemy, and yet because of the fox, they allowed him to join forces with them. That was not surprising, it was survival after all, foes became friends impossibly fast when their survival became dependant upon one another. But what was surprising was that they treated him and Konan with some measure of respect.

"Thanks," he said as he took the plate from her. "Are you angry with me for completely merging with Yahiko?"

"No." He was taken back as she gave him a small smile… something that he hadn't seen in years. "It makes it easier to keep an eye on both of you."

"I see."

"You seem lighter, Nagato."

The Rinnegan user blinked as he glanced over at her.

"Lighter?"

"Like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders."

Nagato looked back down at the food in his lap. If there was a lack of weight, it was because he had failed so utterly. Madara had played him for a fool, and now Madara had control of everything he wished to use toward his peace. It would be impossible to reclaim the power as the Uchiha had no doubt merged into it now. No, the only thing he had left was to destroy that power. Madara would not use it to bring peace as he claimed. And as the sole bearer of the Rinnegan, he would not see his efforts sullied. He may not be a god anymore, but he was far more powerful than anyone else. At least until he threw his last technique. Then, he would be helpless for months to come. On one hand it would be wise to wait a few weeks and reclaim his full power, but weeks were not something Madara would allow. Days were not something he would allow.

"I am merely a failure, Konan." Nagato looked back down at the fire. "I claimed to be god and pass my judgment down upon others. Yet, I have been deceived every step of the way."

"What will we do now?"

"Kill Madara."

"Sorry, but that's my job."

The two looked up to see the Jinchuriki they had once killed drop down through the ruins above. He looked at them with a raised eyebrow and shook his head.

"You know what? I'm not going to even ask. You're helping fight Madara, that's good enough for me. Probably wouldn't understand it either."

"Naruto Uzumaki?" Nagato looked back down at his food. "Let me bring my justice down upon Madara. There is no reason for you to waste your life."

He barely registered a shadow appear in front of him and lift him up. His back was slammed against the concrete as Naruto glared at him. Dazed… he was dazed from the blow. It was something that had not occurred in recent memory. Konan appeared behind the boy and held a blade of sharpened paper to his neck.

"Let him go," Konan said."

"Not until he gets his head out of his ass!" Naruto pressed him harder and the concrete started to crack. "You've hurt a lot of people and caused this problem. You don't get to die."

"You wish to punish me then?" Nagato asked.

"No, but you do have a lot to answer for. You can't do that if you are dead. You're not allowed to die until you have made up for every last person you've killed." Naruto slowly set him back down. "As a fellow student of Ero-sensei, you should know that much. You should know to own up to your mistakes."

"You knew who I was?"

"While I was training with the toads, I learned all about Madara, his plans, and you."

Nagato watched as Naruto turned away and stomped down the dark halls further in. Those blue eyes contained such… determination. It was shocking to be stared at like that. Such unwavering spirit was something he had never seen before. A small part of him almost believed in those words.

Kushina watched her son from the back of the room. He was the embodiment of so many investments and hopes. The weight of the village rested on his shoulders along with the futures of every citizen. She could not help but wonder how he was not crushed by such weight. She couldn't even imagine how he made it look so easy.

He had marched in and said the Kyubi was finished, and then declared that he was going after a near omnipotent Madara without a speck of hesitation. Unwavering was the word she would use to describe him. Jiraiya was right. Naruto had surpassed them all, both as a ninja and a person. His strength was like the air. You couldn't see it, but knew it was there. It was the strength Jiraiya had given his life for, and it paid off.

And as a person… she wished she could have had just a fraction of the resolve that he had. Had she had that, maybe then he wouldn't have grown up alone. If she had that, maybe she wouldn't feel like crying right now as her son and husband planned out an assured suicide mission. If she had that, maybe she wouldn't feel like stopping.

Life was cruel. It took away your happiness and then dangled it just out of reach. Life had removed her from her son. It had blessed her with being able to see him again as a man. It had slapped her in the face by showing that he had come out fine without her. Now, it was taking him away from her again.

Why had she allowed herself to be bullied so many years ago? Why had she not fled with him? No, she couldn't think like that. Her choices were already made and the consequence apparent. All she could do now was remain silent about the past. It would be far

crueler of her to tell him the truth and let him fully understand how much she loved him, of how much it killed her to leave him. Right now, he was focused and confident that she and everyone else had his back. She wouldn't disrespect him by throwing the past it front of him.

Still, her mind could not help but delve deeper past, and the bitter thoughts forced their way unwelcomingly into her conscious.

"Not a chance in hell!" Kushina slammed her fist down on the Hokage's desk as the wind picked up around her. She wasn't unaware of the hidden Anbu inch their way toward her.

Sarutobi gave her an apologetic look despite keeping a stern face.

"Kushina, please keep calm. Losing your temper will not help your situation," the old Hokage said.

"I don't have a situation, old man. My Uzu heritage has never been a problem in all the years I have been here." She whirled around and glared at the bandaged Danzo. "So don't blackmail me about it. I've been as loyal to this village as anyone who was born here."

"We are not blackmailing you, Kushina Uzumaki." Danzo remained stoic even as a breeze warningly brushed his hair. "It is a fact that you have been in this village under our good graces. It is well past time you repay Konoha's generosity."

"I have no problem with that, but not now. Naruto is only a month old!"

"Kushina." Hiruzen spoke firmly enough she turned back to him. "Normally, I would never ask this of a new mother. However, the Fire Daimyo is personally requesting this new base and Uzu is the best location for what we have designed. The Kyubi attack has shown how vulnerable we are if there is no place to retreat to. We need this

base, and knowing that a possible safe haven is under construction will help calm a panicky civilian population."

Kushina clenched her fists and struggled to keep from twisting the air around them and killing them both. It wouldn't work on Sarutobi, but maybe she'd get lucky with Danzo.

"Fine, let me take Naruto with me then. I'm not leaving him here alone."

"The Fire Daimyo agrees with me that allowing the container of the Nine-Tails out of our walls is foolish."

Danzo didn't flinch even as razor sharp blades of wind snapped around him in a violent vortex.

"You call my son that again, and I will remove your god damned head from you shoulders."

"Enough, Kushina!" Hiruzen let out a small potent burst of chakra. "Danzo, please leave, you are not helping matters."

Danzo's good eye cracked open and stared unflinchingly at Kushina. However, the man quickly closed it and turned. He left quietly and shut the door with a soft click. Kushina's shoulders shook in frustration as shaky breaths wracked her chest. That bastard, she should have done Konoha a favor and killed him. But if she had, well, she didn't need to add traitor to her list of titles.

"Kushina," Hiruzen sighed. "You know what will happen if you leave with Naruto. Even if I could placate the Fire Daimyo, Danzo would send every one of his private troops after you, and continue hunting you until he took Naruto. Then, your son would be out of my protection."

Tears pricked out from the corners of her eyes. It wasn't fair. She'd already lost her Minato, and now… damn it!

"This village already hates him, old man. I can't leave him alone in a world where he'll be treated as an outcast."

"I will keep him safe and healthy, Kushina. Let us pray that as the son of you and the Fourth Hokage, his will of fire will prove to them all that he is indeed worthy of their admiration."

"And what if he doesn't? What if he becomes hateful and never knows that anyone loved him?"

"I don't know, Kushina. I wish I did."

"You don't have to do this," Kushina said as Naruto smiled at her.

"Yeah, I do. I'm the only one who can."

"But not by yourself, let us come with you."

Naruto sighed and scratched the top of his head. No one had been happy about his news that he was going after Madara. They were even less happy by his insistence that he go alone, at least it saved hours of planning. His father had gone to gather the villagers from the monuments shelter, and sent the ninja there to gather the rest of the citizens. That was an hour ago. He had been left with a silent Hinata, and his mother who was adamant that he not go through with his plans.

He watched as the crowd gathered before the ruins they stood on. The people were battered, sad, but far from broken. As always, the will of fire would reignite. Hearts would mend. Strength would return. It would just take time. His father appeared to his side as the last of the crowd stumbled in. He forced himself to memorize as many faces as he could. This is what he was fighting for. Why he should have wanted to be the Hokage.

"Everyone," Minato said. "We do not have a lot of time. So please, listen well."

The crowd became so silent it nearly sent a chill up Naruto's spine.

"I'm not one for speeches. Those of you who knew me before will agree with this." Several ninja nodded. "Before I begin, do all of you still have the will to fight on?"

Shouts burst from the crowd as if no hardship had ever touched them. Every eye was unwavering. Every spirit was prepared to do what was necessary. Every shout was a promise to continue.

"Good, because we have a long journey ahead of us." The crowd quieted again. "There is an outpost to the east. That will be our new home for a little while. Don't worry, we will be returning to Konoha someday. But for now, we need to seek safety."

"You are welcome to come to Kumo as well," the bandaged Raikage said quietly. "It is my apology for attacking you, Hokage-dono."

"Thank you, rest assured we will call for your help in the future." Minato returned his attention to the crowd. "There is one last threat that needs to be overcome. My son, our most powerful ninja, will be the one to take up this task."

"Your son?" One woman in the crowd asked. "Who, Yondaime-sama."

"Naruto Uzumaki, as you can see." Minato glanced to the side where Naruto had been moments before. "He's still as eager as ever."

Several people chuckled as others gossiped excitedly. Minato gave one last look at Kushina as they nodded to each other.

"Gather what you can, we leave in the morning.'

Naruto chuckled to himself as he walked along the dark roads of the forest. All the years of wanting recognition, and he skips out on the

one time he would be cheered by the village. He really was kind of stupid.

"I really hope you weren't planning on leaving without me, Naruto-kun," Hinata said as she dropped down from a tree. "We're supposed to stick together from now on remember?"

"I figured you'd catch up, Hinata. You say your goodbyes?"

"Yes, my family cheered me on and said to come home safe."

"Did you tell them you would?"

"Yes, it seemed like the kindest thing to do."

"I have done the same with Gai-sensei," Lee said as he landed down next to them.

"Lee, what are you-?"

"We are teammates and shall stick together."

Naruto shook his head and started back down the path. If they wanted to fight, then he had no right to stop them. Besides, he was probably going to need the extra help. Still, a part of him wanted them to stay behind. He wanted them to live on.

"Troublesome."

Naruto turned around and nearly burst out laughing at Shikamaru's appearance. The shadow user was bandaged like a mummy and was stumbling around as he tried to support an exhausted Shino. It was rather odd seeing the stoic-nin with out his normal high collared jacket.

"No way, not a chance you two are coming along," Naruto said as he walked back towards them.

"We're not going to. Just wanted to say, come back safe," Shikamaru said.

"Yes, you must do so. Why you ask? Because, our team consists of five members."

"Guys, tha-."

"Naruto-chan!"

Naruto's eyes widened as his mother appeared from a gentle breeze and grabbed hold of him. He didn't have time to react as he was pulled into a hug. She gripped him so hard his back started to crack. He could only hang around helplessly as she swung him around comically.

"Kushina, we do need Naruto to fight." Minato appeared behind her. "He can't do that if he is crippled."

"Really?"

She squeezed even harder as if to test the theory.

"Co- come on, I've got to get going." Naruto dislodged himself from her hug and took a gasping breath. "What're you two doing here?"

"We wanted to wish you off," Minato said. "Let you know we're right behind you."

"I also had to embarrass you just once." Kushina looked down. "Sorry for being selfish again."

Naruto smiled and shook his head. He wasn't sure what would have happened in the future with them. There was probably too much of a divide between them to ever become what they wanted. However, he could at least pretend for their sake. He could give them some small measure of peace. It was what he did. It was what Jiraiya had always said was his most important quality. His ability to be kind.

"It's okay… Mom."

Kushina blinked in surprise before she quickly turned away.

"You know a four man squad is required for the majority of missions." They looked up to see Kakashi sitting on a branch. His nose buried in a book. "You wouldn't mind if I tagged along, Sensei?"

Minato smiled appreciatively at his silver haired student.

"Not at all, Kakashi. Although, Naruto is in charge of this operation."

"Are you sure Kakashi-sensei?"

Kakashi sighed and slipped his book back into his pocket. With a hop, he fell out of the tree and landed quietly on the ground.

"You're fighting an Uchiha. I doubt my Sharingan will be anywhere near his in power, but it could be useful."

Kakashi reached into his pocket and pulled out a camera.

"Since we have the chance, I have some extra film I'd like to use up."

"Sure," Naruto glanced down at his necklace before pulling it off. "Hey Shikamaru, make sure that Konohamaru get's this."

He tossed the gem over to his pineapple haired teammate.

"Sure Naruto."

"Pain and Konan have already gone ahead with one of my kunai," Minato said. "I'll take everyone to Ame. It will save you a trip."

"Thanks… Dad."

Minato smiled and grabbed the camera from Kakashi.

"Let's finish this up."

The bulb flashed repeatedly in the darkness. Memories forged out of a will to not let go of the present. A feeling of being blessed because of a rare opportunity to have such memories caught in the ageless pictures. Pictures that would be a reminder of what they lost, but what they also had. Sadness had no place here, nor the sense that it was not enough. For to feel such things would waste the rare precious moment. Instead, it was enough to be content within the time given.

The bulb flashed repeatedly in the darkness… a countdown to goodbye.

"What is on your mind, Nagato?" Konan asked as she carried them through the sky on wings of paper. "You seem lost in thought."

"That child… there was no hatred in his eyes."

"Really?"

"We had killed him, and indirectly helped destroy his village. Yet, I didn't see any hate. I saw… something else."

"You believe he is not a part of the cycle of pain like the rest of the world?"

"He is a part of it. However, it is indescribable, like he decided to fight it instead of succumb to it… a rejection of what I had considered the purest truth."

Konan looked down at him.

"Had?"

"I'm not sure anymore. I'm not sure of anything. I still believe that my path was correct, but for the first time, I lack the absolute certainty that went along with it."

Naruto watched from the edge of the forest they had appeared in. A gigantic tower stretched out towards the sky, as if trying to touch the heavens. Several jagged columns turned upward at the top, as if they were fingers trying to grasp the universe. He could feel the energy coming off of it. The evil saturating everything.

The fact that they were so many miles outside of Ame surprised him. He was under the impression that was where their headquarters were. Pain had stated that it was because Madara wanted the world to know that it was his tower, and that he led everything not that he was tied to a single village. In short, the man had as big an ego as Sasuke… if not more.

"Why the tower?" Hinata asked. "I am seeing only three chakra signatures aside from the demonic chakra coursing through the entire structure."

"The Demonic Statue of the Outer Path will attempt to get as close as possible to the moon, which is where the Jubi's corpse is located." Nagato looked up at the swirling energies above the tower. "It will also make it easier to broadcast his genjutsu."

"Why do you know of his plans, Nagato-san?" Lee asked.

"I researched all of the possible uses for the collection of the beasts. I was unaware that he knew of it as well. It was naïve of me."

"You got that right." Naruto walked forward. "Okay, here's the plan. If we take out that tower, the statue crumbles and the genjutsu can't be used right?"

"Yes, but he will just rebuild it again," Nagato said. "However, I believe his power is tied to the tower. If you defeat him, then with the towers collapse, he should not be able to recover."

"Right. Lee and Hinata will deal with the other two guys in the lower tower. Kakashi-sensei, you and I will deal with Madara. Nagato, you

claim that your jutsu can take that tower down?"

"Yes, and Konan can get me high above it."

"Alright then, let's do this!"

Hinata could not help but feel the apprehension growing in her gut. It was always there on any mission. The subtle worry that someone may not return home, or worse, that the mission would be a failure. As a ninja, you learned to deal with that feeling. You learned to harness it and turn it into determination. But this time, this time no amount of determination would disguise that twisting sensation in her belly.

This was a death march.

Lee blasted the front doors open with a powerful kick. The urge to have one last moment with Naruto welled up in her. A goodbye, a hug, just one last second of being near him, it would have been nice. Instead, the four of them ran into the gaping maw of the tower. There was only one reason that the tower would have had doors. Madara wanted them there.

She looked around quickly as her eyes adjusted to the dark. The room was barren with no discernable means to climb up higher.

"You see any way to go up, Hinata?" Naruto asked.

She activated her eyes and pushed the vision in a single direction. There wasn't anything. Not a single indication of anything. The chakra lacing the walls of the tower would make it difficult to run up… but not impossible.

"There's nothing."

"Then let us make a path," Lee said as he crouched down.

"That will not be necessary."

The dark voice seemed to come off everything at once. It surrounded them and choked out everything else… even her thoughts. It was startling, and in a way, overpowering. Had she not had to face similar circumstances of oppression with her family, she would be nothing, but mush on the ground.

Naruto went completely still for a moment, and Hinata wondered if he had been caught off guard. However, when his eyes became golden with toad like pupils, she realized he had just been preparing for something.

"Madara, we're coming up!"

"Let me assist you then. My servants have already picked who they wish to deal with."

Hinata felt herself being sucked into something. The sensation was akin to what she assumed being pulled down a drain felt like. She barely saw the others sharing a similar fate. The world went blank and then back into color almost faster than she could register. For a moment, she thought she hadn't gone anywhere. The room appeared to be the same, wide and open, with an unbelievably high ceiling. However, she quickly realized she was wrong. There were plants… a lot of plants.

"Oh, it's the girl. Although, I'm kind of full still."

"Silence fool, Tobi requested us to deal with one of them, and Kisame wanted the boy."

Hinata looked to her side as a strange figure rose up out of the ground. A Venus flytrap type apparatus encased its dual colored head. Her eyes narrowed as she slid back into a fighting stance. She brought her palm up and activated her eyes. The world outside of her vision went black. In a way, she was now in her own little world. Sure, she could hear beyond her sphere, but not seeing was strange. Even after her training, it still left her feeling a little

vulnerable, and she had to resist the urge to cancel the technique. She was glad she did.

Her enemy's chakra coated the entire room, and the roots of his plants churned under her feet deep in the floor. She frowned. He was in complete control of the environment. She deactivated her eyes and launched herself straight towards him. If he got her on the defensive, she would not be able to gain another chance to attack. His superior advantage with the environment would only be offset if she was faster than he could react.

Five enormous flytraps with dripping teeth burst from the ceiling and raced towards her. She flipped backwards as they crashed into the ground. Her feet snagged in the ground as the roots wrapped around them. The flying heads recovered and tore after her. Chakra surged from her palm into a thin beam, and with a graceful twist of inhuman flexibility, the roots and flytraps were severed into countless pieces.

"Oh, she cut them?" Zetsu's white half said with a toothy grin.

"Sad, her own prowess will be her downfall."

Hinata's eyes widened as a thick steaming green goop exploded from the remains of the plants. She leapt back in barely enough time to escape the liquid. The stuff splashed upon the ground with a terrible hiss. It bubbled and ate through the floor until the roots reabsorbed it into the room's ecosystem. She glanced down at the edge of her coat's sleeve. It literally melted off in a series of drips.

Her eyes roamed along the walls and took in all the growing foliage and vegetation. The Akatsuki member was probably in complete control of every inch of this place. It was also reasonable to assume that every leaf, flower, and vine was filled with that disgustingly corrosive acid.

"Wow, she dodged it! Good job little girl." The white half gave a creepy smile.

"Quiet you fool." The black half's yellow eye drifted down to her. "You can't win."

"I've been told that many times before."

"Those who said it merely said so out of confidence, or vast underestimation of your skills. However, it is fact when we say so."

"I will win. I have to."

"Yes, you may succeed in killing us. However, you have already realized this entire room is like an extension of my body."

"Yes, you are maintaining the plant life continually with your chakra."

"Then, surely you realize what will happen if that chakra were to cease?"

"The acid would pour out of everything."

"That's right girly! Whether you're skewered, or devoured, or melted into nothing, you're going to die. The walls of this place are so thick you can't break them down fast enough to escape from an acid bath."

Hinata sprinted forward so fast she could tell he lost sight of her. However, he could probably pick up on the vibrations of her footsteps or possibly even her chakra. Her assumption was proven right when more flytrap heads appeared from the ceilings and walls. She didn't stop. A sharp electric blue chakra sword covered and extended from her right hand. She stabbed forward, but Zetsu sunk into the ground unbelievably fast. Her eyes activated and she twisted around with her blade and sliced away at the rabid vegetation. Movements that would normally not be possible or cause bones to snap were done with such fluidity, it appeared as if it should be normal.

Acid burst forward and threatened to shower her. She twisted into a tight rapid spin.

"Kaiten!"

The acid connected with the blue shield with a boiling screech, but failed to consume it. Inside, Hinata could feel the strain on the technique. She could feel her chakra being pulled from her, something that should not normally happen. Did the acid also absorb her chakra? Her technique ended as the acid stopped. She floated in the air helplessly as she saw spear like vines rushing her from all directions.

"Kaiten: Danpen!"

Chakra beams shot from her palms as she spun again. They arked around her protectively as she became a violent helix of razor sharp energy blades. The vines were dissected like they had been stuffed into a shredder as the chakra ripped them apart. Hinata quickly released the technique letting the whips fly off around the room as her eyesight returned to normal. She immediately wished she hadn't.

A lone flytrap sprung from the ceiling and crunched down painfully on her exposed side. It pushed her down into the floor causing a small crater. The acid scattered before it slowly trickled over the edge and pooled around her. The excruciation she felt caused her to flail wildly for a moment before her battle instincts kicked in. She sliced the head in half and leapt out of the pit. For the briefest of moments, she was in the worst pain she had ever experienced. But it ended quickly, and she knew the liquid had already burned through her nerve endings. It was kind of stupid. She had gained a healing ability, but the acid would eat away at any new tissue that formed.

She tilted her head back and activated her eyes as she stood still. What a foolish mistake it was to hold back. At first, it was because she wanted to be able to fight again if needed. But as the fight progressed, it was more a matter of stalling until she could find an

exit from the death trap. It didn't really matter she guessed. The end result would have been the same regardless.

"Has the acid gotten to her brain?" The white half asked as Zetsu emerged from the ground.

"No, can't you feel her building up for something. She'd better hurry though. That acid will have her completely melted in about ten more seconds."

The prized techniques of the Hyuga head were based on changing the potency of the chakra, thus making it exponentially denser. Her father had taught her how to do so to great success. During their training, he had also discovered that her new eyes relied on a thin veil of chakra that emanated from her when she activated the technique. It produced a spherical blanket and that was what allowed her to see. He had claimed that if she could combine chakra conversion, her eye veil, and her impeccable control she would be able to create a new and unsurpassable technique.

So she had. It may not be unsurpassable, but it was by far her most devastating. The problem with it was that it taxed her chakra, full or not, to the point that she would pass out after one attempt. This left her defenseless, let alone able to fight on. However, it appeared she didn't have the option of not using it if the human plant was going to die with her.

"Shugohakke Harinezumi."

Her voice was low and nearly tranquil. She didn't move or twitch. Electric blue chakra simply engulfed her in a sphere. It sparked and pushed away everything that came near it like a glowing rubber ball.

"Huh?" The white half blinked.

Millions of beams shot out in all directions with a speed beyond that of lighting. Zetsu was pierced through completely in thousands of points as the same thing happened to the entire room. Every plant

was lanced to an unrecoverable state. Zetsu twitched with a strange smile as every important organ was destroyed in his body. Then, the beams began to rotate and shred everything.

The chakra stopped as suddenly as it had appeared. Hinata fell to her knees as life faded from her eyes. Acid burst from all around and fell towards her as parts of Zetsu fell dead to the ground.

"Na-ru… to-kun, you still owe… me… a… date."

A rain of removal filled the room… and its inhabitants were no more.

Lee stretched out his legs as he looked over at the blue skinned man on the other end of the room. The shark like man kept a vicious grin plastered on his face as a large strange weapon rested on his shoulders. It looked like a giant puffy club with thousands of sharp blades attached to it. The green clad ninja had just exited from whatever warp that had possessed him to find the man there asking him if he was ready to fight. His opponent was kind enough to let him stretch.

"Hurry up brat, Samehada may not be hungry anymore, but I'm just itching to shave those eyebrows."

"Sorry, shark-san."

"It's Kisame. What's the matter? That guy you look like never mentioned he fought me?"

"I am afraid Gai-sensei did not. He only usually speaks of his greatest or most self-discovering battles."

The air seemed to grow colder as Kisame's look grew angrier.

"Kid, I got no qualms with you." He swung Samehada off his shoulder. "You're just unlucky enough to have the same stupid looking appearance as your teacher."

Chakra erupted from the man with an intensity Lee had only felt from Naruto.

"And I really hate that guy!"

Lee bounced to his feet as Kisame charged with an impressive degree of speed. Lee popped the cork on his flask and downed all of its contents. He would need his weights to deflect the sword, and to keep up with that speed he would need at least the first two gates. His muscles quickly relaxed as he dodged to the side of an immense sword strike that left a large crack in the ground. Wind pushed away from the attack by the sheer force of the swing.

"Kaimon open!" Lee burst into a zigzag of speed and threw a kick at Kisame's head. "Kyumon open!"

The kick sped up in mid-attack and crashed into Kisame's blocking arm. The two slid on the floor as Kisame swung Samehada up. Lee flipped onto his hands and lashed out with a series of kicks as he spun on his hands. He reached out and grabbed his opponent's ankle and twisted as his other hand chopped at the knee. Kisame prevented a face plant by catching himself with his sword. Using his massive strength, the missing-nin pushed himself up and swung with a twist. Lee blocked with his weights and was sent flying back, barely having time to flip in the air and land on the wall safely.

Lee's weights crumbled away from his legs as he fell to the ground. Kisame hopped up and rolled his neck before looking down at his blade.

"What they hell, Samehada. Why aren't you devouring this guy's chakra? You have a stomach ache?"

"Kisame-san, I have no chakra."

"What?"

"It would appear this places you at a disadvantage, yes?"

Kisame grinned and turned fully to Lee.

"Nah, I'm just too use to fighting this way. I've got more than enough chakra as it is."

His chakra skyrocketed as he formed the Ram seal and sucked in a lung full of air. He opened his mouth wide and a torrent of water gushed out like a tidal wave. Lee was swept up in its wake and slammed painfully into the wall behind him as the room filled with water.

"Suiton: Dai Bakusui Shoha."

Lee looked through the water to see his opponent, now sword-less, and in a disturbing human shark hybrid form. He frowned and pushed off the wall as he released two more gates. Like a torpedo, he dove through the water with his fist waved back. He swung it forward so fast that ii was nothing more than a vague blur… only to hit nothing.

"Hey, you're slow." Kisame said from behind him.

Lee gasped out in pain as a fin blade was lodged deep in his back. He grit his teeth and swung his fist around. Kisame dodged easily and unleashed with a flurry of brutal punches causing Lee to bounce around helplessly. The shark-nin grabbed his leg and flung him down onto the ground.

Lee's vision started to fade as the lack of oxygen started to slow his brain. Shaking his head, he summoned two more gates and blasted off the ground. He spun to look up as a school of sharks swam down towards him. His hands slammed together in a crushing clap that sent violent ripples through the pseudo aquarium. The sharks exploded in a mass of bubbles.

Kisame blasted through the bubbles and the two locked in a furious taijutsu battle. Every attack was met with a block. Every counter was countered. However, Lee could feel himself slowing even faster and

his vision becoming cloudy. His lungs screamed for air, and even with six gates he was feeling sluggish. He dodged to Kisame's left, and the missing-nin opened his mouth wide. A vortex of water exploded from his mouth and blasted Lee backwards into the wall. The green clad ninja cried out as the pressure from the attack caused his bones to groan and his already worn muscles to bruise.

Was this all that he had? Was this where his trials ended? He had come far, and he felt no shame looking back and seeing how high he had climbed. His teacher, his father figure, had given so much of his life to see him improve. Lee felt his tears merge into the water. He wanted to continue climbing with his cherished teacher's cheers. He wanted to live on, and maybe find someone that would love life as much as he did… to have children with that woman and raise them with the same kindness and devotion that Gai had. But most of all, he wanted to remain with his new team. To see how all of them would grow and become closer, and how they would set a new standard for shinobi.

How he wanted all of that. But, this man in front of him was so overwhelmingly above his strength, it would not be possible. The only thing he could do now was to grasp victory, to make sure that no one would halt his friends from stopping the evil that threatened all. It was time for his springtime of youth to blossom into a full burning summer.

"Kyomon open!" His muscles tensed to the point he felt his bones crack as his white eyes opened wide, and he screamed out with such intensity the water surged away from him. "Shimon open!"

The water instantly boiled under the energy he was putting off and Kisame swallowed it up as fast as possible to keep from being scorched. Samehada emerged from his arm as he returned to normal. Lee's eyes narrowed and he blinked out of existence. Kisame put his back against the wall and brought his sword in front of him as a shield.

Lee used a devastating spinning kick that caused the stone floor to be gouged out just from the air pressure. His first leg's shin connected with Samehada and shattered the sword while his own leg was torn off. The second kick continued with the spin and his heal sliced Kisame in half from shoulder to hip. He punched forward with both hands, and the energy radiating from the fists vaporized what remained of the sword, master, and the entire wall behind them.

Lee collapsed to the ground panting as the effects of the gates wore off. He didn't reflect on his mangled body. Victory was his. His friends were safe, and soon so would Konoha. He closed his eyes as flashes of his loved ones appeared in his mind. Despite his reservations, he found himself in a state of peace, even as blood leaked from his mouth and his lungs seized up. He smiled as he heart stopped.

He really did turn out to be a splendid ninja.

Naruto winced as something cold settled in his chest for the second time in a matter of minutes. Being a sage and being in tune to nature was both a blessing and a curse. It was great that he could find everyone, but he could also…

His gold eyes focused on the shadow sitting under the spiraling energy above. He and Kakashi were at the top of the tower. The cool air of the night circulated freely, and were it not for the evil tendrils of demonic power blocking the view; it would have been a gorgeous view of the starry sky. Kakashi stood to his side. His headband already up and Sharingan at the ready.

The shadow stood up and strode out of the dark like a king that was surveying a battlefield his army had already claimed. The smug jerk already thought he had won. Naruto took a few steps forward as he got a closer look. The man sure didn't look like an Uchiha. And that sure as hell wasn't any Sharingan.

The man was tall and well built. His hair was long and spiky and a high collared coat colored the same as the Akatsuki covered him. However, his eyes were a different story. They looked like Pain's eyes, but were the same blood red as the Sharingan. Whatever they were, they freaked him out. And the chakra… it wasn't human. He would be stretching it if he said it was demonic. It was so absolutely sickening, and there was so much of it. Even in sage mode and the comfort resulting from being one with nature, he felt dwarfed by this… thing in front of him.

"I see you are confused by my appearance," the figure said. "I wasn't expecting it myself actually, but I can't say it is a bad thing. The body you see before you is that of the Rikudo Sennin. I should have realized that it was the only vessel capable of containing the Jubi's power."

"You switched bodies?" Naruto asked.

"My previous body was more a phantasm that grossly limited my power. Granted, I lose the ability to become intangible, but that is a small sacrifice." His eyes bore down on them. "Besides, it is not like you will be able to hit me anyways."

"I suppose that is an open challenge, Naruto." Kakashi stepped forward as his Raikiri blazed to life in his palm. "Be careful, I'll leave the heavy hitting to you."

"Aside from being pointless, it really is not necessary for you to fight me." Madara stepped down and onto the open platform. "I merely desire to achieve what the Uchiha have always deserved."

"Fugasaku already told me about your clan's history and its relation to the great sage." Naruto brought his fingers up in a cross. "Just because you guys didn't get picked to go for ice cream, you decided to throw a temper tantrum by blaming everyone else. Instead of realizing, that the reason you weren't shown favor was because you were a bunch of arrogant power hungry bastards."

"Do you have any idea of how painful it is to not be shown favor by the person you revere most? Can you comprehend the hatre-."

"I've lived most of my life as the dead last that no one wanted. But, I didn't deceive myself into thinking I was special. I didn't give up! I made them see me and respect me through my own efforts. I didn't force them like you want to, and I didn't hate them because I refused to change myself!"

A hundred Naruto's popped into existence, several with sage eyes, some with tails, and others with the red eyes of the Kyubi. They charged in with a yell, and a hailstorm of wind powered kunai and Rasengan swarmed around the last Uchiha. Naruto raised his hand above his head and shaped his Rasengan into a shuriken. He let the wind increase the rotation even faster.

"Futon: Rasenshuriken!" He cried out as he flung it into the clone mass.

He immediately went still and felt the nature energy absorb into his body. There were two clones back with Pa and Ma toad, but he didn't want to pull them unless absolutely necessary. If he could summon the energy on his own, he would. The spinning projectile expanded and the gathering mass of clones were consumed in its countless wind blades.

"Whew, that looks like it would have hurt," Madara said from behind him. Naruto glanced over his shoulder. "But as I said, you won't hit me."

"Really?"

Bunshin exploded in a rush of smoke and his custom tag was set off. The wind chakra he had been storing inside himself fanned the flames to a searing dome of fire. Madara leapt back, and the real Naruto high in the air fell towards him. The blonde blew a blade of wind on his kunai and used his Shunshin to push him down faster. Two techniques compliments of that old war hawk.

"Wind element huh?" Madara glanced up. "Weak against fire."

The Uchiha swung his hand up in an arc of flame. Naruto shielded his face as the flames were increased by his own attack, and the fire surrounded him. Madara kicked him away as Kakashi shot up from under the ground. His hand crackled with a furious lightning as he stabbed straight for Madara's heart.

"Lightning element?" A razor sharp wind whipped up and cut through the copy-nin's technique. "Weak against wind."

Kakashi grabbed Madara's feet tightly.

"Senpo: Odama Rasengan!"

Madara disappeared just less than a paper's width from the giant blue sphere. Kakashi was destroyed in a puff of smoke. Naruto glanced behind him as a gloved fist raced to his face. He relaxed and gathered more nature energy. The attack wouldn't hit. Kakashi burst from the ground with another Raikiri as Madara's eyes narrowed.

"Don't you children learn?"

The wind kicked up again, and the Henge around Kakashi's hand dropped revealing another custom exploding tag. It ignited just as the first stream of wind touched it. Naruto dove away as the fire was fueled to a near white hot state and the Kakashi Bunshin exploded adding to the chaos.

The blonde panted heavily and wiped sweat away from his brow as the fires started to die down. Had that got him? No, he would have heard something from the man. He probably pulled another element to shield himself, unless he used that warp technique. Madara was as skilled as he was powerful. Even with Kakashi, it felt like they were two genin being batted around by a Kage. The fact that Madara hadn't really started using chakra yet was also a concern.

From what he could tell, the Akatsuki leader did not need to use hand seals. Rather, he could freely manipulate any element that he chose. But, it seemed he could only use one at a time, and it wasn't quite as instantaneous as Gaara's sand. There was definitely a delay when he switched between the different kinds, but no more than a second. His eyes were definitely similar to the Sharingan, and Naruto guessed that the teleporting jutsu was derived directly from that.

"You know. I'm getting tired of your friend jumping out of the ground like a mole." Madara sauntered out of the flames. "I should probably do something about that."

He tapped his foot on the ground once and there was a faint rumbling quickly followed by a stone fist punching Kakashi out of the ground. Naruto went to move forward, but Madara appeared in front of him and punched him in the gut harder than anyone ever had. Even with the nature chakra in his system, he felt his ribs crack and organs pop. Madara grabbed his collar and started to bash his fist against him furiously.

"I see that I literally have to split open your head for the reality of the situation to get through that thick skull of yours."

Naruto's eyes started to roll back into his head as the fist rained down on him again and again. His body started feeling light as his head bounced around. He could see Kakashi floating through the air in a daze, and the sharp spike of stone rushing towards him. He could see in his mind all of those that passed before him. He could see Madara's glee in his red eyes… and it pissed him off.

Demonic chakra poured into his system and seven purple tails sprouted behind him. A vertical slit crossed with the horizontal toad, and Naruto gripped his assailant's wrist. His organs healed rapidly, and he let out a bone shattering roar. Madara's eyes widened as the energy blasted up against him like a sizzling wall. The ground depressed and cracked as the stone spines were blasted away from Kakashi.

Madara warped away and Naruto used a Kyubi powered Shunshin to zip next to Kakashi and back to the ground. Five of his clones popped into existence and formed a protective ring around student and teacher. The blonde looked down as his teacher's Sharingan drifted up to him.

"Yo, Naruto."

Naruto couldn't remember his first teacher's voice being that weak.

"Can you move?"

"Afraid not, I heard something snap when he hit me… and well, I can't feel anything below my neck."

Naruto's eyes widened fearfully.

"Kakashi-sensei-."

"It's alright, Naruto. We knew stuff like this was going to happen."

A choking presence consumed the space around them. Naruto looked back as Madara became enveloped in a black cloak and nine tails grew behind him. Despite struggling not to, Naruto could not help but tremble slightly at the red eyed devil behind him.

"I'm rather glad you chose to take this to another level, Naruto Uzumaki. I was hoping to test out this power." Madara took a step forward and the loose rubble from the stone spikes was crushed from his sheer presence. "You're lucky that I lost the pure Sharingan. Otherwise you'd be unable to use my little pet's whiffs of power."

"Naruto, listen." Kakashi tilted his head. "Lay me on my side so I can face your fight. Can you hold him off for a little bit."

"… Yes."

"Good, I'm going to try and neutralize his teleportation jutsu. It took me a minute to realize it, but he's using Kamui. It is a Sharingan

technique that I can use. Never thought you could warp yourself though… regardless, I should be able to stop him from vanishing. However, he's powerful enough it won't last long and I'll exhaust my chakra with one shot. You have to finish him in one move. Do you have something that can do that?"

Naruto forced a grin and nodded. He hated this… saying goodbye. He rested his teacher as instructed and stood. It was stupid that he had any hope everyone would go home in the first place. But still, he'd wanted that to be the case so much. His eyes cut over to the man that started everything. Had this man not had his aspirations, Naruto would have had a family… but he would not have become the person he had. He would not be able to understand the pain of loneliness. Had this man not been so selfish, he would be able to have a chance to get closer to his parents, his team, and Hinata. Man, life sucked sometimes.

He filled his body to the brim with the nature chakra around him, and then did something he never would have thought possible. Danzo's transference of techniques had taught him more than probably the war hawk had even realized. The reason Naruto's Shunshin was different was because he was using chakra externally as he did with everything else. Danzo's Shunshin focused on internal usage of the chakra. When he summoned the Kyubi's power, it always resulted in an external cloak and tails. But if he were to focus it inward… it would work well or make him explode.

Nine exquisitely detailed tails emerged behind him and a red glow surrounded him as it stuck tightly to his skin. He looked down at his darkened finger nails. It was all mixing within him… all four energies. A chuckle escaped his lips. He could already tell why he had never attempted something like this before. All these energies were both fusing and separating simultaneously, it was wreaking havoc on his system. He was breaking down and healing constantly. It seemed though that every energy was playing a different part, which was weird because normally it was just one chakra. However, now it

seemed more like the Kyubi's chakra was acting like a hyper dense armor while the sage chakra was powering his body.

"What an interesting combination of chakra, Naruto." Madara stood less than twenty feet from him. "I wonder if you can control it. Tell me Naruto, do you think you can push me into using all my tails?"

"Only one way to find out you bastard!"

Naruto launched forward so fast he momentarily wondered if he was on par with his father's Hiraishin. It was a ridiculous thought, but his body was surprising him. He reared back a clawed hand and clashed with Madara. The latter slid back as he blocked with his forearm. Naruto grinned only for the man to let out a roar of his own and send him flying back. The blonde flipped and landed on all fours. This wasn't good. He had maybe a minute before he maxed out. Even if he dropped the chakra now, he wouldn't be able to bring it back up, and he needed it for his final jutsu.

Naruto formed a dark sphere between his palms. It was intentionally low powered. If he could play to the Uchiha's ego, Madara would no doubt try to use his own big attack… something that would take time. It was well hidden, but his enemy was not fully accustomed with his new body. Unlike Naruto, who was a master of his. With that thought, he thrust his hands forward ignoring the flesh being burned down to the bone.

Madara's red eyes widened slightly, and he glanced behind him at the tip of the tower where the energy was gathering. His mouth curved up in an angry snarl and a tenth tail emerged. He took the blast full on as Naruto grinned. The bastard couldn't risk the tower going down! This was their chance.

Naruto stretched his palm out. This jutsu was what he had built off of his Shinku Rasengan. The reversed rotation gave a vacuuming effect. The wind element sped the rotation to the point that it created a type of gravity. The sage chakra would provide a shell powerful

enough to hold it. The Kyubi's power would add the needed power to increase it. His arm just needed to hold out for a little bit.

Madara went to warp away from the tower, but a look of surprise flickered within his eyes when he failed to. His gaze turned down to a struggling Kakashi. The copy-nin's Mangekyo bled like a waterfall as the strain increased.

"Kamui from a non-Uchiha? Very impressive, and to think that you have enough power to temporarily halt my own is a testament to your skill." Madara's gaze turned back to Naruto, whose technique was nearing completion. "I will let you kill yourself and ruin your eye. I can crush this child without moving."

He held up his hand as energy rushed to it. Then entire tower began to shake.

"Imari."

Naruto charged forward as he put everything into this last attack. Every heartbeat gave it more power. Every step, gave it more speed. He swung it forward as the attacks clashed in an impossible quake of energy. Naruto's feet slid back as the Imari blast pushed against his own jutsu. Yet, he gave a feral grin, and screamed with every fiber of his being.

The shell on his technique cracked.

Kakashi's eye burst.

Madara's eyes widened as he felt something pull him and his attack.

Pain floated high above the tower amongst the clouds as Konan's paper wings flapped gently. He watched as a massive black dome encompassed the top of the tower and began to suck in anything close to it. His jaw dropped slightly as he witnessed it. A black hole? The blonde had reversed his own wind element enough to disperse

the air into a hyper-vacuum? He shook such thoughts from his mind and motioned for Konan to drop him.

She did and he started to plummet towards the crumbling tower. His palm pushed forward and he focused every last ounce of chakra he could to it.

"Shinra Tensei!"

A burst of compressed gravity blasted from his outstretched hand. It raced downward as the black dome began to shrink along with half of the tower. His blast hit full force and the tower was flattened and pushed into a deep crater in a massive roar of falling rock and exploding chakra. Nagato's body went limp as Konan swooped down and caught him.

"Are you okay, Nagato?"

He panted heavily but nodded.

"Konan?"

"Yes?"

"Let us go back to Ame. I want… to make it something Yahiko would be proud of."

Konan banked to the left as a genuine smile graced her lips.

The story splits into 2 different endings from here on:

Ending one is a new chapter written nearly 11 years after this story, and it will conclude things in a manner that will hopefully satisfy readers left disgruntled with what I'm calling the sequel path.

Ending two is the original ending that leads Naruto and Co into the sequel Naruto Rend. More details on that will be in the appropriate chapter.

Original Author's Notes:

Well here it is, the conclusion of this "little" story. Some people could be upset with the speed of this chapter, but considering it was a race against time, I would like to think I nailed it. I try to have the writing relate to the content. So while it is fast, it is supposed to be. The characters can't catch their breaths so why should the reader?

Some people may also think that the story is rather short. It's almost five hundred pages just for those curious, so it is plenty long.

The reviews for Kushina were interesting, hopefully I demonstrated her predicament to show that she didn't just drop Naruto like many assumed.

So that being said, let me touch on a couple of things.

The first is that I have contemplated a sequel, most of you will already have figured out at least one major component already. But before anyone asks, I will not be writing it in the near future. Why bring it up then? Because, I want to nip that question in the bud versus responding individually to future questions.

I say near future for several reasons. First, the sheer amount of research involved will take a great deal of time to prepare alongside a full plot. Second, I don't have the time to do another multi-hundred page story on the side. This story ended up becoming my focal point and the main site suffered for it. I can't let that happen again.

Third, the main site (wrathful squirrel entertainment) has been neglected for almost six months now. It will be my focus until I reach my goal of 1,000 consistant viewers weekly (I have a long way to go in that aspect). I'm also trying to pick up an agent this year as well for my novel so my writing schedule is pretty full. I did enjoy writing this story (most of the time) but my original works need to get back to the forefront of my efforts.

So if you want a time frame, I'm looking at a year to two years from now before I even start writing sequel. Again, that's being optimistic.

That said, I want to thank everyone of you for sticking with me to the end, even if there were things you didn't like/agree with. I enjoyed most of the critiques (even those that were critical), and believe that I have improved greatly because of them.

I guess I will leave everything at that. I offer an invitation to the main site where my original works are available (for free to be clear). I doubt many of you will take me up on that, but if you've enjoyed this and my writing style, you would probably like my better stories. I would love any imput you had on them.

So, hope you enjoyed the ride and keep on the look out for a sequel in the far future.

Signing off,

Warj

Home (Ending 1)

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 24 (Ending 1):

Naruto sat on a bolder and sipped his water. Stopping was the last thing he wanted to do, but he also couldn't show up drenched in sweat and gasping for air. Anko assured him the snakes weren't going to attack him. *One perk to saving the world.* Still, that didn't mean he wanted to be poorly received by them.

Or her.

Five years since he felt her life vanish. Five years since he awoke in Konoha's Uzu outpost assured by Kushina that the Yondaime rescued her. Four years since Kiba's pilgrimage to find her led him to the base of the mountain hiding Ryuchi Cave. Four years of being told to wait for her.

Two weeks since he was summoned to finally see her.

He stretched his malformed right leg and looked out over the Land Fire. *Quite a view.* He truly missed leaping through those branches- the coil in his muscles the instant before diving into the air. The wind rushing past his face. The bark under his hands. *Well.* He glanced at the missing right limb. *Hand.*

It wasn't right to complain about it though, especially after so much sacrifice.

"Ok." He stood and started limping up the steps engraved into the mountain. "Just a little more."

After Pain and Kyubi, the med-nin were stretched to their breaking point with more injured than they could treat. They lacked the sheer ability to save him and many others. He understood what Kakashi-sensei-with no Sharingan and ability to move-was thinking.

No one knew who actually performed the Edo Tensei on him. Most assumed it was Yondaime. Being the Hokage gave him access to kinjutsu like that. However, morally speaking, that wasn't something he seemed capable of. *Though Ero-sennin always said, desperation could make people do things they'd never consider normally.*

Everyone's feelings were complicated about it. Resurrecting Baa-chan saved a lot of lives. It gave him functioning organs and a leg good enough to at least walk. She finally had time to teach all she knew to Ino, the medical divisions, and write down a library's worth of curriculums and theories to research. All that knowledge would have been lost without those extra two years.

But all that good came about by doing something so… wrong.

The stairs reached the summit and cut sharply into a thick forest. Even without sage mode, he felt eyes watching through the foliage. *This is it.* Sucking in a breath, he followed the path as it wound and looped. Twice it seemed he backtracked. Several other times he felt like a genjutsu was being cast, only for it to suddenly stop. The cave itself seemed far too small, but once he entered, it seemingly expanded into a large cavern.

No mistaking it. His eyes adjusted to the dim light as shadows slithered to and from other shadows. *I'm surrounded.*

"Hello, Naruto Uzumaki." A wall faded, revealing a giant white snake sitting atop an ornamental seat. "On behalf of all Ryuchi Cave, I welcome you."

"Thank you." He offered a polite nod.

"I know why you are here, but you should know I have invested a great deal of time into her senjutsu training." She switched the pipe in her mouth from one side to the other. "Her natural talent, and the changes made to her body, have allowed her to master our arts more than any other."

"That's not a surprise." He ignored the spasm in his side. *Should have had a toad carry me up the mountain.* "She's awesome."

"You'll understand then why I'm reluctant to part with someone I consider worthy of being my successor." Her demeanor hadn't changed, but the atmosphere became heavier. "Will you allow me to judge who you and your village are for myself?"

He forced a shrug. *Anko warned me the snakes liked their tests.* "Sure."

"After Konoha's fall to the Kyubi, why did your people choose exodus?"

"The village was destroyed. We'd lost the majority of our strongest ninja. Iwa saw an opportunity to expand its territory and reverse its defeats in the previous wars."

"So you fled to Uzushiogakure, despite Kumogakure's Raikage being indebted to you."

"The Yondaime and the lazy bum knew involving Kumo would trigger another Shinobi war, and we'd seen enough bloodshed." He gripped his empty shoulder, the scar tissue pronounced through his robes. "They felt rehabilitating the injured was ultimately the smartest choice."

"Yet, you returned." Parts of her coiled tighter around the pillars on either side of the seat. "I heard you chased the Iwa-nin out with a single attack. How?"

"I only showed the jutsu to get their attention." He scratched the back of his head with a grin. "The rest came down to talking it out."

"Was this the same technique you used to vanquish the demon, Madara?"

He still felt a phantom pain in his missing hand whenever someone mentioned the void-producing Rasengan. "No. That was special just for him. Never plan on using it again." *Since I wasn't supposed to survive the first time.*

The emptiness had swelled so quickly. The Yondaime said that even inside the Hiraishin's world, it expanded at high speed. He grabbed Kakashi when the Rasnegan clashed with Madara's attack. In the split second between then and Yondaime using Hiraishin to reach his chakra tails, the void had taken his limbs and a good chunk of torso.

The old snake reclined. "Show us."

"What?"

"Show us the jutsu you used to halt the Iwa invasion."

"It's kind of bright." He held his hand overhead. "Futon: Choodama Rasenshurikan."

A brilliant white orb shrieked into existence, its whirling blades mere inches from carving the cave walls. The wind kicked hard enough the old snake had to hold her headdress with her tail, and the multitude of snakes retreated behind rocks and crevices.

"The one I showed off to Iwa was about five times this size, but I had activated sage mode." He clenched his fist, and the technique ended. "Guess they figured it wasn't worth dealing with." *Helped both Yondaime and I appeared with a Hiraishin to really rattle them.*

"That is easily an upper tailed beast's worth of chakra." She readjusted her hat. "Why do I sense no demonic energy?"

"Cause it has been converted into mine. Long story." He felt his body start to ache. *Going to need to sit soon.* "Look. I'll answer all your questions before I leave, but you're not who I came see." His eyes took on a harder glint. "Your curiosity can wait."

"Fairly put." She puffed on her pipe, and a few fires illuminated the cave. "She's been here the entire time. If your bond is true, you should have no problem finding her."

Like I could miss her. He approached a snake twice as tall as him, a small-soft smile tugging his lips. The scales gleamed like moonlight on water, and his breath caught the moment he looked into those lavender eyes. They were filled with the same emotions stirring in his chest. Joy.

Anxiety.

"Hey, Hinata."

The other snakes went still, watching and waiting.

She shrunk like she used to as a kid. "How." Her voice-her wonderful-delicate voice-came across so softly he barely hear it. "How did you know it was me?"

"How couldn't I." The smile grew into his signature grin. "Snake or human, you're still the most beautiful person in the room."

Naruto settled onto a log residing on the cliff's edge, letting the sun warm him. Hinata coiled beside the log with her head high and eyes locked on the horizon. *Now what do I say?* A billion things bubbled in his chest. Questions. Wanting to share what they both endured. How much he…

"I'm sorry." She looked down as if her hands were fiddling with each other. "This can't be easy."

"I'm just so happy to have you near me again that I have no clue what to say." He gave a big toothy grin. "I think we can both agree that's the biggest shock today."

She covered her mouth with the tip of her tail to stifle a giggle.

That laugh. He'd become so accustomed to that laugh when they shared his apartment. How she tried to hide her amusement when he did something stupid. That kind smile that grew into laughter as if she couldn't contain how happy she felt. He had missed that giggle.

He missed it so much it nearly hurt hearing it again.

"I mean." His chin dipped and voice softened. "There's so much to tell you. To hear about you. My chest is on fire because I'm just so grateful… to see you." He rubbed the back of his neck, and the cold memory of her life vanishing knotted in his chest. "When I felt your life disappear at the tower, I thought for sure you-but then, I heard the Yondaime got you out. Only for you to disappear when he went back for Kakashi-sensei and me." He bit his lip a moment, struggling to keep his emotions in check. "I was so scared for you. So scared that you were out there hurt and alone."

"I was scared for you to." She curled around him and rested her head atop his. "After Yondaime-sama saved me from the acid, I saw a void encompass Madara's tower." She let him wrap his arm around her. "I wanted to stay, but that same feeling I'd been struggling with-the slithering-became so intense. It felt like I was sinking into my own body, and all I kept screaming was to stay awake, but I couldn't. I just… faded." She slid her head so her chin rested on his shoulder. "The last thing I remember was my jaw unhinging."

Like an evolved version of Orochimaru's recovery jutsu? "When did you wake up?"

"The Great Sage says I arrived here several days after the tower's destruction, drawn to the Cave on pure instinct. She brought my consciousness back."

An invisible weight fall off his shoulders, and he hugged her tighter.

The fact Yondaime found what amounted to a shed skin where he left her led them all to guess she transformed. She'd struggled with the snake pupils by themselves. To change fully must have been terrifying, and they worried she had intentionally ran away. Did she think they'd reject her? Was she mutating out of control? Had Orochimaru or Danzo somehow hid their genes in the modifications and taken over? The questions had built and built, as had his frustration at being crippled and unable to find her. The self-hatred that he hadn't proved he'd accept her fully. No matter what.

Knowing she had no choice made it a little more bearable.

"I went back to Konoha." Her scales felt smooth on his cheek. "Iwa was coming, and everyone raced around desperately salvaging whatever they could take." Despite seeming like liquid incarnate, she stiffened. "I saw you."

"Oh."

It'd been a good month before he regained consciousness, but people had told him it'd been bad. The final Jinchuriki transformation had damaged him on a cellular level, so badly, his body started treating the Kyubi's chakra like poison. His right side gone, and the remainder held inside him by Ino's desperation and Yondaime trying one seal after another. Couldn't have been pretty.

"I couldn't talk then, and the Great Sage determined Orochimaru's cursed seals- and by extension the modifications to my body-were derived from a forgotten clan's blood. It meant my body passively absorbed natural energy. When hurt, the trait became more amplified."

"Which is why you turned after the damage." *It's similar to how I risked turning into a toad and then stone when I originally learned the sage arts* . "Your body absorbed too much."

"And it was doing so constantly, putting my mind constantly at risk of reverting to pure snake. I needed the Great Sage to teach me how to master natural energy and my body. With all of you heading to Uzu and the very real chance I'd fail in the training, I decided to stay hidden." The frustration in her voice gave a rawness to it he'd never heard before. "I hated it. I hated not being with all of you and felt so useless watching Iwa invade our home. They destroyed our monument and tried to hunt all of you down. Despite everything we'd done and the strength I'd gained, when Konoha needed me, all I could do was watch. I just… that had to change."

They fell silent. Her breathing deep and filled with emotion while he tried to hold her close.

It was ridiculous. No matter how badly they suffered, it always came back to their home. He couldn't move like a ninja anymore, so he learned the Hiraishin, Uzu wind manipulation, and developed his jutsu to be more long range. She isolated herself to learn the snake arts in order to return to the battlefield. Being a ninja had deprived them of so many things people took for granted. It robbed them of friends and nearly cost them each other. They should hate it.

But it'd be like denying themselves air.

"There were rumors about a forest guardian who saved our scouts from Iwa forces." He placed his hand on her head. "I'm guessing that was you?"

"Yes." She uncoiled and settled beside the log. "I haven't visited since you rebuilt the walls. How is everyone?"

Where do I start? So much had happened. The harsh journey to the Uzu base produced a hundred stories alone. Did he talk about who got together and started a family? Who accomplished what incredible mission? The new ramen the old man made to celebrate Konoha's rebirth? *There's no good starting point.*

So he just started talking.

He revealed Konohamaru and her sister were a thing, and how Hiashi seemed ok with it because he only paralyzed his protégé twice so far. Iruka-sensei had a kid with the crazy snake lady from their first chunin exam, and they name him Naru. They spent a long time talking about Kiba. How he was the only one on Team 8 not chosen to be part of the Hokage's personal team way back then, and that he blamed himself for getting left behind. How he became determined to take up Lee's mantle as the physical powerhouse on the team.

When Kiba made it his personal mission to find Hinata and bring her back to them.

She laughed about how everyone pestered Shikamaru into being Hokage, and when that failed, they got Temari to do it. That even while complaining the entire time, the lazy bum worked twice as hard as everyone else to get the village back on its feet. She smiled when he explained just how much Shino had grown, and the pride in her eyes when he mentioned how many thought he may surpass the Yondaime.

He talked through the setting sun and long into the night even as clouds rolled in and stole the moonlight.

"What about you?" Her eyes just barely shown in the dark. "Did you ever come to a resolution with your parents? I know when you called them Mom and Dad, you did it as a kindness."

Resolution… that was a good word for it. His parents had been there every step of his recovery from when he couldn't eat without help to discovering how to be a viable ninja again. It'd given him time to ask questions. He learned about the multiple situations Danzo placed Kushina in to separate them before finally convincing the Fire Daimyo to send her to Uzu. How the Yondaime designed the seal on his belly on the fly while fighting the Kyubi. It helped in some ways… less so emotionally. They understood though. Kushina openly acknowledged that no explanation they gave would erase the

loneliness he felt growing up. Nothing would ever make things feel like he hadn't been screwed.

After that admission, things had gotten a little better. He stopped feeling like they were trying to balance the scale to absolve themselves. That they genuinely wanted to be a part of his future. Sure. It took a brief nosedive when they told him she was pregnant again. But… the sheer guilt and anguish on her face ended that quickly. He didn't want his resentment to ruin another kid's childhood, so he acted like he thought it was awesome. He played the doting big brother. Though weirdly enough, the twins of terror actually healed things. He got to see the kind of parents they could have been if the situation allowed. It lessened the sting, and while he still couldn't view them as Mom and Dad, they were people he appreciated having in his life.

And he'd be lying if he didn't admit those two little monsters constantly chasing him around made him feel loved. With them and Naru watching in awe, he stood a little taller in those moments when his body wanted to shut down.

"Yeah, they knew I did that just because I figured I wouldn't see them again." He stretched his bad leg straight, the muscles groaning in protest. "We're in a good spot though-stable."

"I'm glad."

The silence returned without the earlier awkwardness. In the dark, it felt the same when the two of them and Lee had sat in the training fields looking at the stars. Talking proved the five years hadn't weakened their bond or lessened the peace he felt sitting beside her. For brief moments, he forgot how much time had passed… that things had changed. It was no longer just them, their team, and their village. Hinata had built a new life in these caves and become endeared enough the old snake wanted her to be the next Great Sage.

Was returning to Konoha even what she wanted anymore?

"What the old snake said. Do." He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Do you want to? Succeed her, I mean."

"No."

"Then why?" He shot to his feet, so he was closer to her height. "Why stay away? Why not let me come see you?"

"Because I wasn't sure if what I wanted to accomplish from the training was possible." A gentle breeze nearly swept her words away. "I didn't want us to have false hope."

"False hope? What's false about being able to see you and know your ok? What's wrong with being able to stand beside you and talk and laugh-"

A hand touched his cheek, and all his thoughts stopped.

Slowly, moonlight peeled the night back like a curtain. Her long black hair draped over the straps of her dress-the gooseflesh skin pale and soft. She traced a thumb over his whiskers and stepped closer.

"I didn't want to just disguise myself with a genjutsu or change into my human form only to wake up in the middle of the night as a snake again." She cupped his face with the other hand. "It took me all this time to fully master it… to be truly human again." Her hands trembled. "I couldn't see you without knowing we'd have the future we both wanted… without the hope we could have a fam- famil-"

He crushed her against him, holding her as if he feared she'd slip away the instant he let go. "You are my family, Hinata."

Their tears started slowly at first… their doubts crumbling under the sheer relief they felt. Overcoming the long years and the distance forced upon them. They cried for the loved ones gone and the anguish in loosing one another. For all the days they spent facing an uncertain future. To being reunited when it seemed impossible so many times.

He rested his forehead on her shoulder. "Guess you take the biggest shock today."

"I wanted to greet you like this, but the Great Sage wanted proof you'd accept me even as a snake." She let go and took a step back. "I owed her that request."

Snakes and their tests. "Guess we should let her know I passed."

"I'm sure she already knew deep down." She smiled at him fully. "It's time for me to return home, Naruto-kun."

He took her hand and smiled. "Ok Hinata."

His senses reached out across the many miles until he felt the needed Hiraishin seal. With a flash, the mountain disappeared, and they were standing atop the cliffs that once housed the Hokage monument. The many lights decorating homes and streets sparkled like stars in the village below.

Hinata's mouth parted in awe as fresh tears formed.

He gave a reassuring squeeze and joined her in looking over their village.

"Welcome home, Hinata."

FIN

Author's Notes 7/7/2020:

When I ended this story nearly 11 years ago, I had no idea how divisive the original (Rend) ending would be even to this day… and just how much the fandom despised crossovers as a general rule.

I'd intended to just lie in the bed I made, but recently, a reader suggested I do another end for those… disinclined to seeing how Naruto and Co's story continued. After struggling to write anything

engaging the past 3 years, I hoped something short and fun like this might finally activate the creative centers in my brain.

Originally, this was going to include a several chapters of flashbacks that acted as a substitute for a Kushina/Minato prequel that'd I'd toyed around with but knew there wasn't enough meat to the story. However, as Kushina told Naruto, no amount of answers would change things. People either hated Kushina or understood her situation. Nothing I wrote would change that.

That left the remainder, which would have been focused on Naruto's recovery and journey to find/reach Hinata. Again though, there wasn't enough substance to have another full arc without becoming repetitive or leaving large gaps.

So, I decided to instead try my hand at a true epilogue.

After completely tossing three earlier versions, I'm still unsatisfied with the sentence structure and flow, but hopefully it will still give people the closure Rend denied them. It killed off those last few little creative itches I had for the Naruto universe, and I learned writing is probably something I've lost the ability to do. Perhaps, someday I can revisit it when life doesn't have me pulled in 20 different direction at any given moment.

Somber attitude aside, I genuinely do appreciate everyone for taking the time to read, comment, and share this and Rend (negative ones included) even after all these years. I still learn from and discuss with readers to present day. There is something so utterly fulfilling about creating something and having others become invested in it, and I am ultimately happy for the experiences I gained through these 2 stories.

So, thank you again.

And be well.

Rend (Ending 2)

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto and do not claim to. This story is merely for entertainment uses only.

Naruto Asunder

Chapter 24 (Rend Ending):

FIVE YEARS LATER:

"Naruto, we're going to be late so hurry up!" Iruka shouted back into his home.

He looked back out at Konoha. It had been rebuilt pretty quickly since their return three years ago. Of course, a great deal of that was because of the Raikage's insistence his village help. You'd think after guarding the village since its original destruction, Kumo would have thought they paid them back. He shook his head.

"Naruto, we better not miss Shikamaru's party because you're fooling around!"

"Relax, Iruka-kun," Anko said as she slid up behind him. Her pregnant belly pressed up against his back. "The lazy bum won't care if we're a few minutes late."

"He's being announced as the successor to the Yondaime. It's very important to make a good impression if we want to make suggestions for teams down the road."

Iruka felt something run into his leg and grip it tight. He looked down at his young son. The boy looked up at him with an impossibly toothy grin. His purple eyes shimmered mischievously, and a pair of worn goggles was nestled in his brown hair.

"I'm here, Daddy." The little boy said with an exaggerated face for each syllable.

"Naruto." Iruka leaned down with a frustrated twitch. "What am I going to do with you?"

He picked the boy up high into the air and caught him as Naruto squealed with laughter. Iruka held one ankle and let his son dangle freely as they started walking down the road. The boy never lost his smile or stopped giggling as he swung back and forth.

"He's definitely your son," Iruka chuckled.

"I'm not the one who taught him the best way to paint the Hokage monument."

"Fair enough."

"Hey, hey look it's Konohamaru-nichan!" Naruto pointed excitedly. "Nichan!"

Konohamaru turned as a green gem swung around his neck. He waved as they walked up to him.

"Hey gaki," Anko said as she slid up slyly. "Word has it that you and the little Hyuga princess have been getting closer daily."

"It's just sparring, Anko." The seventeen year old blushed slightly. "Really intense sparring."

"Nice gaki."

"Please, shut up."

"Hey, Nichan. Can we train and play ninja later?" Naruto swung around excitedly in his father's grip. "I got to keep getting stronger."

"Of course Naruto, after the party, I promise."

"Yay, I'm going to be Hokage!" Naruto did an impromptu dance upside down. "And then, I'm going to surpass other Nichan."

"Other nichan?" Konohamaru looked up at the parents in confusion.

"He means Naruto."

"Oh," Konohamaru got a small nostalgic smile on his face. "It seems like everyone does these days. That entire team was what every ninja has strived to achieve for the past few years."

"Well, one is going to be the Hokage. The other one is on the verge of surpassing the Yondaime in strength. The other three took out Biju powered missing-nins." Anko chuckled as she looked up. "Kind of hard not to be star struck."

She leaned down low in front of her child with a terrifying grin.

"But my baby is going to work with snakes not toads right?"

"Both."

The boy just laughed. Anko sighed as Konohamaru started down the opposite way.

"I'll see you both later. Enma wanted to work with me a little bit."

They waved goodbye and started in their own direction.

"Naruto really had an affect on him didn't he?" Anko asked more to herself than anyone.

"Yeah, aside from apes and fire nature, he's a carbon copy."

"Right down to chasing after Hyuga girls. Hiashi must be thrilled."

"I hear he's alright with it. He only threatened to make Konohamaru impotent twice."

Anko laughed as Iruka set their son up on his shoulders. The boy kept singing a tune about how he was going to be the best ninja ever.

"I feel sorry for his jonin sensei." Iruka shook his head as he glanced up at his son. "Or the one who get's the Namikaze twins."

"Bah, Kurenai's brat will be on one of their teams and she'll keep them all in line." She grinned. "We should get all four on the same team."

Iruka shuttered at that thought.

"Speaking of the Namikaze, how is Temari's wind training with Kushina going?"

"Pretty good, she'll need to be tough to keep the lazy bum in line. The future wife of the Hokage needs to be just as strong." Anko's eyes lit up as if she remembered something. "Did you hear the rumors about Yugao and bug boy?"

"I know that they're the strongest team in Konoha and close friends."

"Close… try possibly parents."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Could you imagine? The kid of the strongest ninja in the village and the Anbu captain? Captain stoic and the ice queen?"

"He'd be strong that's for sure." Iruka looked up at the sky. "I think this next generation is going to be almost as interesting as the last one."

"You still miss him… them?"

"Everyday. I see how happy Choji and Ino are, or Kiba or any of them. I really think he would have appreciated how everything turned out."

"He's watching out for us. They all are." She slapped him on the butt causing him to jump and Naruto to giggle. "Enough of this sentimental stuff. With this little bun, I'm stuck with just dango. You need to drink enough for both of us."

Iruka sighed. The Namikaze twins, Jiraiya and Tsunade, Kurenai and Asuma's girl Hiru, and their Naruto… all taught by Shikamaru. What a team indeed.

"What do you think Naruto? Could you share your spirit with this next group as you watch over them?"

"You're not him either."

Naruto Uzumaki cracked a bleary eye, trying to locate the source of the strange voice. A rotund figure skipped away from him through the blackness. He could barely make out the large off-white coat that fell below its knees. Swallowing the dryness in his mouth as his vision focused, Naruto failed to make anything but a faint gasp come out.

The figure turned, a white smile of dagger shaped teeth consumed most of a long face as menacing yellow eyes glared wickedly from behind a pair of thin wired glasses. The little skin showing was smooth and grayish, highlighting the long pointed ears pressed out by the rim of a tall hat.

"Good evening." The creature's grin never stopped, nor did the clenched teeth separate, leaving the voice slightly muffled. "How sad it is for you to be up so early my little friend."

NARUTO'S JOURNEY WILL CONTINUE

Author's Notes:

Hold onto your Naruto-canon like a security blanket, because Naruto Rend is a crossover. Heavy on the Bleach, strong dose of D Gray Man, just the tiniest dash of Samurai Deeper Kyo.

I wrote Rend so you don't have to have knowledge about those worlds/stories, since it is told through Naruto's eyes. The plot is more complex, it can be a bit heavier in parts, and it starts slower, but the writing is superior to Asunder and the stakes are bigger. I, personally, also really enjoyed writing how the characters (Naruto especially) reconciled their deaths, and their emotional journey throughout Rend.

If it doesn't appeal to you, go back and read Home (Ending 1) where Naruto and Hinata's journey ends. I get most don't like crossovers, so that's why I wrote the alternate end.

However, if you want to read Naruto's journey as originally intended, give Rend a shot.

Regardless, thank you for reading and commenting after all these years.